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DARKNESS AND DAWN

OR

SCENES IN THE DAYS OF NERO

AN HISTORIC TALE

BY

F. W. FARRAR

NEW IMPRESSION

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
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FREDERICVS GVLIELMVS FARRAR

Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro,
Che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
Dell'aer puro infino al primo giro,
Agli occhi miei ricomincio diletto,
Tosto ch'io usci fuor dell'aura morta,
Che m'avea contristato gli occhi e'l petto.

DANTE, *Purgatorio*, I. 13–18.

The orient sapphire's hue of sweetest tone,
Which gathered in the aspect calm and bright
Of that pure air as far as heaven's first zone,
Now to mine eyes brought back the old delight
Soon as I passed forth from the dead dank air
Which eyes and heart had veiled with saddest night.

PLUMPTRE.

PREFACE

I HAVE endeavoured to choose a title for this book which shall truly describe its contents. The 'Darkness' of which I speak is the darkness of a decadent Paganism; the 'Dawn' is the dawn of Christianity. Although the story is continuous, I have called it '*Scenes* in the Days of Nero,' because the outline is determined by the actual events of Pagan and Christian history, more than by the fortunes of the characters who are here introduced. In other words, the fiction is throughout controlled and dominated by historic facts. The purport of this tale is no less high and serious than that which I have had in view in every other book which I have written. It has been the illustration of a supreme and deeply interesting problem — the causes, namely, why a religion so humble in its origin and so feeble in its earthly resources as Christianity, won so majestic a victory over the power, the glory, and the intellect of the civilised world.

The greater part of the following story has been for some years in manuscript, and, since it was designed, and nearly completed, several books have appeared which deal with the same epoch. Some of these I have not seen. From none of them have I consciously borrowed even the smallest hint.

Those who are familiar with the literature of the first century will recognise that even for the minutest allusions

and particulars I have contemporary authority. Expressions and incidents which, to some, might seem to be startlingly modern, are in reality suggested by passages in the satirists, epigrammatists, and romancers of the Empire, or by anecdotes preserved in the grave pages of Seneca and the elder Pliny. I have, of course, so far assumed the liberty accorded to writers of historic fiction as occasionally to deviate, to a small extent, from exact chronology, but such deviations are very trivial in comparison with those which have been permitted to others, and especially to the great masters of historic fiction.

All who know most thoroughly the real features of that Pagan darkness which was deepest before the Christian dawn will see that scarcely even by the most distant allusion have I referred to some of the worst features in the life of that day. While I have not extenuated the realities of cruelty and bloodshed, I have repeatedly softened down their more terrible incidents and details. To have altered that aspect of monotonous misery which pained and wearied its ancient annalist would have been to falsify the real characteristics of the age with which I had to deal.

The book is not a novel, nor is it to be judged as a novel. The outline has been imperatively decided for me by the exigencies of fact, not by the rules of art. I have been compelled to deal with an epoch which I should never have touched if I had not seen, in the features which it presented, one main explanation of an historical event the most sacred and the most interesting on which the mind can dwell.

The same object has made it inevitable that, at least in passing glimpses, the figures of several whose names are

surrounded with hallowed associations should appear in these pages. I could not otherwise bring out the truths which it was my aim to set forth. But in this matter I do not think that any serious reader will accuse me of irreverence. Onesimus, Pudens, Claudia, and a few others, must be regarded as imaginary persons, except in name, but scarcely in one incident have I touched the Preachers of early Christianity with the finger of fiction. They were, indeed, men of like passions with ourselves, and as St. Chrysostom says of St. Paul, 'Even if he was Paul, he was yet a man;' but recognising their sacred dignity, I have almost entirely confined their words to words of revelation. Even if I had done more than this, I might plead the grave sanction and example of Dante, and Milton, and Browning. But the small liberty which I have dared to use has only been in directions accorded by the cycle of such early legends as may be considered to be both innocent and hallowed.

F. W. FARRAR.

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BOOK I

'CLOTHO FERT FUSUM'

CHAPTER I

THE SOLILOQUIES OF AGRIPPINA

'Oramus, cave despuas, ocelle,
Ne pœnas Nemesis reposcat a te :
Est vehemens Dea ; lædere hanc caveto.'
CATULL. *Carm.* L. 18–20.

THE Palace of the Cæsars was a building of extraordinary spaciousness and splendour, which had grown with the growing power of the emperors. The state entrance was in the Vicus Apollinis, which led into the Via Sacra. It was an Arch, twenty-nine feet high, surmounted by a statue of Apollo and Diana driving a chariot of four horses, the work of Lysias. Passing the Propylæa the visitor entered the sacred area, paved with white marble and surrounded by fifty-two fluted columns of Numidian giallo antico, with its soft tints of rose and gold. Between these stood statues of the Danaides, with their father Danaus brandishing a naked sword. In the open spaces before them were the statues of their miserable Egyptian husbands, each reining his haughty steed. Here, too, among other priceless works of art, stood the famous Hercules of Lysippus, clothed in his lion's skin and leaning on his club. On one side was the Temple of Apollo, built of the marble of Luna, designed by Bupalos and Anthermos of Chios. On the top of its pediment was the chariot of Apollo in gilt bronze, and the great bronze valves were incrusted with ivory bas-reliefs of the triumph over Niobe, and the panic-stricken flight of the Gauls from Delphi. Behind this temple was the shrine of Vesta, and on the west side the famous Palatine Library, large enough to accommodate the whole Senate, and divided into two compartments, Greek and Latin. In its vestibule was a bronze statue, fifty feet high, which is said to have represented Augustus with the attributes of Apollo.[1]

[1] Note 1. — Palace of the Cæsars. (See Lanciani's *Ancient Rome in the light of Modern Discoveries*, pp. 107–133.) — *For Notes see end of Volume.*

To the Palace and Propylæa of Augustus, with their open spaces, and shrubs, and flowers, and fountains, Tiberius had added a separate palace, known as the Domus Tiberiana, which overlooked the Velabrum; and Gaius — more commonly known by his nickname of Caligula — had filled with buildings the entire space between the Palace and the Forum. He had also purchased the House of Gelotius, and in that humble annex had delighted to spend nights of riotous orgies with the grooms and charioteers of his favourite green faction. Since his time it had been utilised as a training-school for the imperial pages, whose scribblings, sometimes matter-of-fact, sometimes humorous and satirical, can still be traced on the fast-crumbling walls. Vast as was the whole composite structure, it received immense additions from the restless extravagance of Nero, Domitian, and later emperors.

But if it surpassed all the other buildings of imperial Rome in magnificence, it surpassed them also in misery and guilt. Here, in the days of Augustus, the Empress Livia had plotted the murder and removal of all who stood in the way of her son's succession. Here in the days of Tiberius the conscious walls had witnessed the deadly intrigues of Ælius Sejanus. In A.D. 23, that daring and cruel conspirator had secured the poisoning of Drusus, the only son of Tiberius, by insinuating himself into the affections of Livia, his faithless wife. Here in A.D. 33, the younger Drusus, son of the hero Germanicus, was slowly starved to death by order of Tiberius. In one of the subterranean vaults he had poured out his mad reproaches against the tyrant, had writhed under the savage rebukes of the centurion, and had been beaten by the brutal slaves who guarded his dungeon. For nine days he had lingered on, chewing in his agony the tow with which his mattress was stuffed. Here the young Tiberius Gemellus, grandson of Tiberius, piteously ignorant how to kill himself, had been shown how to drive the poniard into his throat by the tribune sent for that purpose by his cousin and adoptive brother, Caligula. Chamber after chamber in that huge structure had witnessed the wild and brutal freaks of that madman-emperor and the tortures which he inflicted upon nobles and senators, whose mouths he ordered to be gagged with their own bloodstained garments. Here he had been visited with the dire vengeance of his crimes; for in the

covered gallery which he had built as a passage between his palace and the theatre, he had been smitten by the fierce sword of the tribune Cassius Chærea. Hard by — the stains of blood were still upon the wall — his empress, the blue-eyed Cæsonia, had been stabbed in the throat as she wailed and wept over the dead body of her lord; and her little infant, Julia Drusilla, had been dashed against the stones.

Such was the Palace of pagan Rome in the days of Christ and His Apostles.

It might well have seemed, even to the most callous worshipper of the old gods, that a dark spirit was walking in that house; that the phantoms of the unavenged dead haunted it; that ghostly footfalls glided through its midnight corridors; and that in hidden corners the lonely wanderer might come on some figure 'weeping tears of blood,' which vanished with 'hollow shriek' before the presence of the innocent.

No such feelings of dread disturbed the thoughts of the Empress Agrippina on a certain September evening, A. D. 54. The world was at her feet, Her brave and good father, Germanicus, her chaste and virtuous mother, the elder Agrippina, had been the idols alike of the Roman soldiers and the Roman people. She was the great-granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus; the granddaughter of the victorious Agrippa; the great-niece of the Emperor Tiberius; the sister of the Emperor Gaius: and now at last her unwearied intrigues had made her the sixth wife of her uncle, the Emperor Claudius. Not content with such near bonds to so many of those who were honoured as gods on earth, did she not mean that her boy also — her darling Nero — should ere long mount the throne of the Cæsars, and that she herself should govern for many a long year in his name, as she now governed in the name of her husband Claudius? Her ancestress Livia, the stately wife of Augustus, had received the imperial title of Augusta, but not until her husband's death; Agrippina had received it, and with it every honour which a servile Senate could devise, in her early prime. Had she not sat on a throne, in unwonted splendour, by the side of her weak and prematurely aged husband at the reception of foreign ambassadors? Was she not privileged, alone of Roman princesses, to ride in a chariot to the Capitol? Was not her fine head and lovely

face stamped on thousands of coins and medals? Had she not shown, in contrast to her predecessor, the beautiful and abandoned Messalina, how dignified could be a matron's rule?

Yes, the world was at her feet; and by every glance and every gesture she showed her consciousness of a grandeur such as no woman had hitherto attained. Her agents and spies were numberless. The Court was with her, for in the days of Claudius the Court meant the all-powerful freedmen, who impudently ruled and pillaged their feeble master; and if she could not seduce the stolid fidelity of his secretary Narcissus, she had not disdained to stoop to the still more powerful Pallas. The people were with her, for she was the sole surviving child of the prince whom they had regarded with extravagant affection. The intellect of Rome was on her side, for Seneca, always among her favourites, had been recalled by her influence from his banishment in feverous Corsica, and, holding the high position of tutor to her son, was devoted to her cause. The Prætorian guards were on her side, for Burrus, their bold and honest commander, owed his office to her request. The power of gold was hers, for her coffers had been filled to bursting by an immeasurable rapacity. The power of fascination was hers, for few of those whom she wished to entangle were able to resist her spells. Above all she could rely absolutely upon herself. Undaunted as her mother, the elder Agrippina; popular as her father, the adored Germanicus; brilliant and audacious as her grandmother, Julia, the unhappy daughter of Augustus; full of masculine energy and aptitude for business as her grandfather Agrippa — who else could show such gifts or command such resources? — But she had not yet drunk to the dregs the cup of ambition which she had long ago lifted to her eager lips.

She was sitting on a low broad-backed seat, enriched with gilding and ivory, in the gorgeous room which was set aside for her special use. It was decorated with every resource of art, and the autumnal sunlight which was falling through its warm and perfumed air glinted on statuettes of gold and silver, on marble bas-reliefs of exquisite fancy, and on walls which glowed with painted peacocks, winged genii, and graceful arabesques.

Her face was the index of a soul which only used the

meaner passions as aids to the gratification of the grander ambitions. No one who saw her, as she leant back in her easy half-recumbent attitude, could have doubted that he was in the presence of a lady born to rule, and in whose veins flowed the noblest blood of the most ancient families of Rome. She was thirty-seven years old, but was still in the zenith of her imperious charms, and her figure had lost none of the smooth and rounded contour of youth. Her features were small and delicate, the forehead well shaped, the eyes singularly bright, and of a light blue, under finely marked eyebrows. Her nose was slightly aquiline, the mouth small and red and beautiful, while the slight protrusion of the upper lip gave to it an expression of decided energy. Her hair was wavy, and fell in multitudes of small curls over her forehead and cheeks, but was confined at the back of the head in a golden net from which a lappet embroidered with pearls and sapphires fell upon her neck, half concealed by one soft and glowing tress.

She sat there deep in thought, and her mind was not occupied with the exquisite image of herself reflected from the silver mirror which hung bright and large upon the wall before her. Her expression was that which she wears in her bust in the Capitol — the expression of one who is anxious, and waits. One sandalled foot rested on the ankle of the other, and her fair hands were lightly folded on her robe. That robe was the long *stola* worn by noble matrons. It swept down to her feet and its sleeves reached to the elbows, where they were fastened by brooches of priceless onyx, leaving bare the rest of her shapely arms. Two large pearls were in her ears, but she had laid aside her other ornaments. On a little marble abacus beside her lay her many-jewelled rings, her superb armlets set with rubies, and the *murenula* — a necklace of linked and flexile gold glittering with gems — which had encircled her neck at the banquet from which she just had risen. Her attitude was one of rest; but there was no rest in the bosom which rose and fell unequally with her varying moods — no rest in the countenance with its look of proud and sleepless determination. She was alone, but a frequent and impatient glance showed that she expected some one to enter. She had dismissed her slaves, and was devoting her whole soul to the absorbing design for which at that moment she lived, and in the accomplishment of which she

persuaded herself that she was ready to die. That design was the elevation of her Nero, at the first possible moment, to the throne whose dizzy steps were so slippery with blood.

In the achievement of her purpose no question of right and wrong for a moment troubled her. Guilt had no horror for that fair woman. She had long determined that neither the stings of conscience nor the fear of peril should stop her haughty course. To her, as to most of the women of high rank in the Rome of the Empire, crime was nothing from which to shrink, and virtue was but an empty name. Philosophers she knew talked of virtue. It was interesting to hear Seneca descant upon it, as she had sometimes heard him do to her boy, while she sat in an adjoining room only separated from them by an embroidered curtain. But she had long ago convinced herself that this was fine talk, and nothing more. Priests pretended to worship the gods; but what were the gods? Had not the Senate made Augustus a god? and had not Tiberius been popularly deified and Caligula, and his little murdered baby, the child of Cæsonia, which had delighted its father by its propensity to scratch? If such beings were gods, to whom incense was burned and altars smoked, assuredly she need not greatly trouble herself about the inhabitants of Olympus.

Nemesis? Was there such a thing as Nemesis? Did a Presence stalk behind the guilty, with leaden pace, with feet shod in wool, which sooner or later overtook them — which cast its dark shadow at last beyond their footsteps — which gradually came up to them, laid its hand upon their shoulders, clutched them, looked them in the face, drove into their heads the adamantine nail whose blow was death? For a few moments her countenance was troubled; but it was not long before she had driven away the gloomy thought with a disdainful smile. It was true that there had been calamity enough in the bloodstained annals of her kinsfolk: calamity all the more deadly in proportion to their awful growth in power and wealth. Her thoughts reverted to the story of her nearest relatives. She thought of the days of Tiberius, when men scarcely dared to speak above a whisper, and when murder lurked at the entrance of every noble home. Her uncles Gaius and Lucius Cæsar had died in the prime of their age. Had they been poisoned by Sejanus? Her other uncle, the

young Agrippa Posthumus — born after the death of his father, Agrippa — had been killed in a mad struggle with the centurion whom Livia had sent to murder him in his lonely exile. Her mother had been cruelly murdered; her aunt, the younger Julia, had died in disgrace and exile on a wretched islet. Her two brothers, Nero and Drusus, had come to miserable ends in the flower of their days. Her third brother, the Emperor Caligula, had been assassinated by conspirators. The two Julias, her sister and her cousin, had fallen victims to the jealous fury of the Empress Messalina. The name of her sister Drusilla had been already stained with a thousand shames. She was the sole survivor of a family of six princes and princesses, all of whom, in spite of all the favours of fortune, had come, in the bloom of life, to violent and shameful ends. She had herself been banished by her brother to the island of Pontia, and had been made to carry on her journey, in her bosom, the inurned ashes of her brother-in-law, Lepidus, with whom, as with others, her name had been dishonourably involved. She had already been twice a widow, and the world said that she had poisoned her second husband, Crispus Passienus. What did she care what the world said? But even if she had poisoned that old and wealthy orator — what then? His wealth had been and would be very useful to her. Since that day her fortunes had been golden. She had been recalled from her dreary banishment. Her soul had been as glowing iron in the flame of adversity; but the day of her adversity had passed. When the time was ripe she had made her magnificent way in the Court of her uncle Claudius until she became his wife, and had swept all her rivals out of her path by her brilliant beauty and triumphant intrigues.

She thought of some of those rivals, and as she thought of them an evil smile lighted up her beautiful features.

Messalina, her predecessor — did not everything seem to be in her favour? Claudius had doted on her; she fooled him to the top of his bent. She had borne him two fair children, and the emperor loved them. Who could help loving the reserved but noble Britannicus, the gentle and innocent Octavia? No doubt Messalina had felt certain that *her* boy should succeed his father. But how badly she had managed! How silly had been her preference for

pleasure over ambition! How easily Agrippina had contrived that, without her taking any overt share in the catastrophe, Messalina should destroy herself by her own shamelessness, and perish, while still little more than girl, by the sword of the executioner, in a pre-eminence of shame!

And Lollia Paulina? What might she not have done with her enormous riches? Agrippina could recall her — not at one of the great Court gatherings, but at an ordinary marriage supper, in which she had appeared in a dress embroidered from head to foot with alternate rows of pearls and emeralds, with emeralds in her hair, emeralds of deepest lustre on her fingers, a carcanet of emeralds — the finest Rome had ever seen — around her neck. Yet this was not her best dress, and her jewels were said to be worth eighty millions of sesterces.[1] She remembered with what a stately step, with what a haughty countenance the great heiress, who had for a short time been Empress as wife of Caligula, passed among the ranks of dazzled courtiers, with the revenues of a province upon her robes. Well, she had dared to be a competitor with Agrippina for the hand of Claudius. It required no small skill to avert the deeply seated Roman prejudice against the union of an uncle with his niece; yet Agrippina had won — thanks to the freedman Pallas, and to other things. She procured the banishment of Lollia, and soon afterwards a tribune was sent and she was bidden to kill herself. The countenance of the thinker darkened for a moment as she remembered the evening when the tribune had returned, and had taken out of its casket the terrible proof that her vengeance was accomplished. How unlike was that ghastly relic to the head whose dark locks had been wreathed with emeralds!

And Domitia Lepida, her sister-in-law, the mother of the Empress Messalina, the aunt of her son Nero, the former wife of her own husband, Crispus Passienus? She was wealthy as herself, beautiful as herself, noble as herself, unscrupulous as herself. She might have been a powerful ally, but how dared she to compete for the affections of Nero? How dared she to be indulgent when Agrippina was severe? The boy had been brought up in her house

[1] Note 2. — Lollia Paulina's jewels.

when his father was dead and his mother an exile. His chances had seemed very small then, and Lepida had so shamefully neglected him that his only tutors were a barber and a dancer. But now that he held the glorious position of Prince of the Roman Youth; now that he wore the manly toga, while Britannicus only stood in humble boy's dress — the embroidered robe, and the golden bulla round his neck to avert the evil eye; now that it seemed probable to all that Nero, the adopted son of Claudius, would be the future Emperor instead of Britannicus, his real son, it was all very well for Domitia to fondle and pamper him. It was a hard matter to get rid of Lepida, for Narcissus, the faithful guardian of Claudius, had opposed the attempt to get her put to death. Nevertheless, Agrippina seldom failed in her purposes; and as for Lepida and Narcissus — their turn might come!

She could only recall one insult which she had not avenged. The senator Galba was rich, and was said by the astrologers to have an imperial nativity. She had therefore made love to him so openly that his mother, Livia Ocellina, had once slapped her in the face. If she had not made Galba and his virago-mother feel the weight of her vengeance, it was only because they were too insignificant to be any longer worthy of her attention. She was too proud to take revenge on minor opposition. The eagle, she thought, does not trouble itself about the mole.

Enough! Her thoughts were getting too agitated! She must go step by step; but who would dare to say that she would not succeed? The wit and purpose of a woman against the world! 'Yes, Nero, my Nero, thou shalt be Emperor yet! Thou shalt rule the world, and I have always ruled thee, and will rule thee still. Thy weak nature is under my dominance; and I, whose heart is hard as the diamond, shall be Empress of the world. Nemesis — if there be a Nemesis — must bide her time.'

She murmured the words in a low tone to herself; but at this point her reverie was broken.

CHAPTER II

AGRIPPINA AND NERO

'Occidat dum imperet.'—Tac. *Ann.* xiv. 9.

A voice was heard in the corridor, the curtain was drawn aside, and a youth of sixteen, but who had nearly completed his seventeenth year, entered the room.

He was still in the bloom of his youthful beauty. His face was stamped with all the nobility of the Domitian race from which he sprang. It had not as yet a trace of that ferocity engendered in later years from an immense vanity clouded by a dim sense of mediocrity. It was perfectly smooth, and there was nothing to give promise of the famous brazen beards of his ancestors, unless it were the light hair, with its slight tinge of red, which was so greatly admired in antiquity, and which looked golden when it caught the sunlight. Round the forehead it was brushed back, but it covered his head with a mass of short and shining curls, and grew low down over the white neck. His face had not yet lost the rose of youth, though its softness spoke of a luxurious life. The eyes were of light grey, and the expression was not ungenial, though, owing to his short sight, his forehead often wore the appearance of a slight frown. He was of middle height, and of those fine proportions which made his flatterers compare him to the youthful God of Song.

'Nero!' exclaimed his mother; 'I thought you were still in the banquet hall. If the Emperor awakes he may notice your absence.'

There is little fear of that,' said Nero, laughing. 'I left the Emperor snoring on his couch, and the other guests decorously trying to suppress the most portentous yawns. They, poor wretches, will have to stay on till midnight or

later, unless Narcissus sets them free from the edifying spectacle of a semi-divinity quite intoxicated.'

'Hush!' said Agrippina, severely. 'This levity is boyish and ill-timed. Jest at what you like, but never at the majesty of the Imperial power — not even in private, not even to me. And remember that palace walls have ears. Did you leave Octavia at the table?'

'I did.'

'Imprudent!' said his mother. 'You know what pains I have taken to keep her from seeing too much of her father except when we are present. Claudius sometimes sleeps off the fumes of wine, and after a doze he can talk as sensibly as he ever does. Was Britannicus in the Hall?'

'Britannicus?' said Nero. 'Of course not. You have taken pains enough, mother, to keep *him* in the background. According to the antique fashion which the Emperor has revived of late, you saw him at the banquet, sitting at the end of the seat behind his father. But the boys have been dismissed with their pedagogues long ago, and, for all I know, Britannicus has been sent to bed.'

'And for whose sake do I take these precautions?' asked the Empress. 'Is it not for your sake, ungrateful? Is it not that you may wear the purple, and tower over the world as the Imperator Romanus?'

'For my sake,' thought Nero, 'and for her own sake, too.' But he said nothing; and as he had not attained to the art of disguising his thoughts from that keenest of observers, he bent down, to conceal a smile, and kissed his mother's cheek, with the murmured words, 'Best of mothers!'

'Best of mothers! Yes; but for how long?' said Agrippina. 'When once I have seated you on the throne —' She broke off her sentence. She had never dared to tell her son the fearful augury which the Chaldeans had uttered of him: 'He shall be Emperor, and shall kill his mother.' He had never dreamed that she had returned the answer: 'Let him slay me, so he be Emperor.'

'*Optima mater*, now and always,' he replied. But I am angry with Britannicus — *very* angry!' and he stamped his foot.

'Why? The boy is harmless enough. I thought you had him completely under your power. You seem to be very

good friends, and I have seen you sitting together, and training your magpies and jays to talk, quite amicably. Nay, though Britannicus hates me, I almost won his heart — for two minutes — by promising to give him my talking-thrush, which eyes us so curiously from its cage.' [1]

'Give it to me, mother,' said Nero. 'A thrush that can talk as yours can is the greatest rarity in the world, and worth ten times over its weight in gold.'

'No, Nero; Britannicus shall have it. I like to see him devoting himself to such trifles. I have other views for you. But what has the poor boy done to offend you?'

'I met him in the Gelotian House,' said Nero, 'and how do you think he dared to address me? *Me*—by sacred adoption the son of Claudius, and, therefore, his elder brother?'

'How?'

'I said to him, quite civilly, "Good morning, Britannicus." He had actually the audacity to reply, "Good morning, *Ahenobarbus!*" Ahenobarbus, indeed! I hate the name. I stand nearer to the divine Augustus than he does.[2] What did he mean by it?'

Agrippina broke into a ripple of laughter. 'The poor harmless lad!' she said. 'It merely was because his wits were wool-gathering, as his father's always are. No doubt he dislikes you—he has good reason to do so; but he meant nothing by it.'

'I doubt that,' answered the youth. 'I suspect that he was prompted to insult me by Narcissus, or Pudens, or the knight Julius Densus or some of the people who are still about him.'

'Ah!' said Agrippina, thoughtfully, 'Narcissus is our most dangerous enemy. He is much too proud of his ivory rod and prætor's insignia. But he is not unassailable. The Emperor was not pleased with the failure of the canal for draining Lake Fucinus, and perhaps I can get Domitius Afer or some one else, to accuse him of embezzling the funds. How else could he have amassed 400,000,000 sesterces? He has the gout very badly, and I will persuade him that it is necessary for him to go to Campania for the benefit of his health. When once he is out of the way — But, Nero, I am expecting a visit from Pallas, with whom I have much important business.

[1] Note 3. — Agrippina's talking thrush.
[2] Note 4. — Nero's Genealogy.

Go back to the hall, my boy, and keep your eyes open always as to what is going on.'

'I will go back,' said Nero; 'but, mother, I sometimes wish that all this was over. I wish I had not been forced to marry Octavia. I shall never like her. I should like to have —'

He stopped, and blushed crimson, for his mother's eagle eye was upon him, and he had almost let out the secret of his sudden and passionate love for Acte, the beautiful freedwoman of his wife.

'Well?' said Agrippina suspiciously, but not ill-pleased to see how her son quailed before her imperious glance. 'Go on.'

'I meant nothing particular,' he stammered, his cheek still dyed with its deep blush, 'but that I sometimes wish I were not going to be Emperor at all. Julius was murdered. Augustus, they say, was poisoned. Tiberius was suffocated. My uncle Gaius was stabbed with many wounds. The life is not a happy one, and the dagger-stab too often finds its way through the purple.'

'Degenerate boy!' said Agrippina; 'I do not wonder that you blush. Is it such a nothing to be a Lord of the World? Have you forgotten that you are a grandson of Germanicus, and that the blood of the Cæsars as well as of the Domitii flows in your veins? One would think you were as ordinary a boy as Britannicus. For shame!'

'Well, well, mother,' he said, 'you always get your own way with every one. Pallas is in the anteroom, and I must go.'

Nero kissed her, and took his leave. Immediately afterwards the slave announced that Pallas was awaiting the pleasure of the Empress.

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CHAPTER III

INSTRUMENTA IMPERII

'It is the curse of kings to be attended
By slaves who take their humours for a warrant
To break into the bloody house of life.'

SHAKESPEARE, *King John.*

THE autumn twilight had by this time faded, but one silver lamp, standing on a slab of softly glowing marble, shed a dim light through the room when the freedman was ushered into it. He was a man of portly presence, and of demeanour amazingly haughty for one who had once bawled 'Sea-urchins for sale!' in the Subura, and come over the sea from his native Arcadia with his feet chalked as a common slave. His immense wealth, his influence over the Emperor, and his advocacy of the claims of Agrippina to her uncle's hand, together with the honours bestowed upon him by the mean adulation of the Senate, had raised him to the pinnacle of his power. Agrippina had stooped to the lowest depths to purchase his adherence, and now there was absolute confidence between them. He was ready to betray the too-indulgent master who had raised him from the dust and heaped upon him gifts and privileges, for which the noblest Consul might have sighed in vain.

Pallas was in a grave mood. The air was full of portents. A tale was on every lip among the common people that a pig had been born with the talons of a hawk. A swarm of bees had settled on the top of the Capitol. The tents and standards of the soldiers had been struck with fire from heaven. In that year a quæstor, an ædile, a tribune, a prætor, and a consul had all died within a few months of each other. Claudius had nominated two consuls, but had only nominated them for a single month. Had he misgivings about his approaching fate? Agrippina was not superstitious, and she

listened to these stories of the Greek freedman with the indifference of disdain. But it was far otherwise when he told her that Narcissus had been heard to utter very dangerous speeches. He had said that whether Britannicus or Nero succeeded, he himself was doomed to perish. Britannicus would hate him as the man who had brought about the death of his mother Messalina. Nero would hate him, because he had opposed his adoption, and the marriage of his mother to the Emperor, both which events had been achieved by the rival influence of Pallas. Still Narcissus was faithful to his kind master, and Britannicus was the Emperor's son. The freedman had been seen to embrace Britannicus; he had spoken of him as the 'true image of Claudius;' had stretched forth his hands now to him and now to heaven, and had prayed 'that the boy might grow speedily to man's estate, and drive away the enemies of his father, even if he also took vengeance on the slayer of his mother.'

Agrippina listened to this report with anxious disquietude, and Pallas told her further that lately the Emperor had often pressed Britannicus and Octavia to his heart; had spoken of their wrongs; had declared that they should not be ousted from their place in his affections by the crafty and upstart son of such a wretch as Domitius Ahenobarbus, of whom it might be said, as the orator Licinius Crassus said of his ancestor, 'No wonder his beard was of brass, since his tongue was of iron, and his heart of lead.' Claudius often repeated himself, and when he saw his son he had several times used the Greek proverb, *ὁ τρώσας καὶ ἰάσεται*, 'he who wounded shall also heal you.'

But worse news followed, and Agrippina grasped the side of her couch with an impulse of terror, when, last of all, Pallas told her that, on that very evening, the Emperor, in his cups, had been heard to mutter to some of his intimates 'that he more than suspected the designs of his wife; and that it had always been his destiny to bear the flagitious conduct of his consorts for a time, but at last to avenge it.'

As she heard these words Agrippina stood up, her arms outstretched, her fine nostril dilated, her whole countenance inflamed with rage and scorn. 'The dotard!' she exclaimed, 'the miserable, drivelling, drunken dotard! He to speak thus of me! Pallas, the hour for delay is over. It is time

to act. But,' she added, 'Narcissus is still here. He loves his master; he watches over him with sleepless vigilance. I dare attempt nothing while he remains about the Court.'

'He is crippled with the gout,' answered Pallas. 'He suffers excruciating agony. He cannot hold out much longer. I told him that you strongly recommended him to try the sulphur baths of Sinuessa. He is nearly certain to take the hint. In a week or two at the latest he will ask leave of absence, for his life is a torture.'

'Good!' whispered the Empress; and then, dropping her voice to a whisper, she hissed into the ear of the freedman, 'Claudius must not live.'

'You need not drop your voice, Augusta,' said Pallas. 'No slave is near. I placed one of my own attendants in the corridor, and forbade him on pain of death to let anyone approach your chamber.'

'You ventured to tell him that?' asked Agrippina, amazed at the freedman's boldness.

'Not to *tell* him that,' answered Pallas. 'Do you suppose that I would degrade myself by speaking to one of my own slaves, or even of my own freedmen — I who, as the senate truly says, am descended from Evander and the ancient kings of Arcadia, though I deign to be among Cæsar's servants? No! a look, a sign, a wave of the hand is sufficient command from me. If anything more is wanted I write it down on my tablets. I rejoice — as I told the senate when they offered me four million sesterces — to serve Cæsar and retain my poverty.'

'The insolent thrall!' thought Agrippina; 'and he says this to me who knows that he was one of the common slaves of Antonia, the Emperor's mother, and still has to conceal under his hair the holes bored in his ears. And he talks of his *poverty* to me, though I know as well as he does how he has amassed sixty million sesterces by robbery in fourteen years!' But she instantly concealed the disdainful smile which flitted across her lips, and repeated in a low voice, 'Claudius must die!'

'The plan has its perils,' said the freedman.

'Not if it remains unknown to the world,' she replied. 'And who will dare to reveal it, when they know that to allude to it is death?'

'If you are the daughter of the beloved Germanicus,' he

said, 'the Emperor is his brother. The soldiers would never rise against him.'

'I did not think of the Prætorians,' said Agrippina. 'There are other means. In the prison beneath this palace is one who will help me.'

'Locusta?' whispered Pallas, with an involuntary shudder. 'But the Emperor has a *prægustator* who tastes every dish and every cup.'

'Yes! The eunuch Halotus,' answered Agrippina. 'He is in my pay; he will do my bidding.'

'But Claudius also has a physician.'

'Yes! The illustrious Xenophon of Cos,' answered the Empress, with a meaning smile.

Pallas raised his hands, half in horror, half in admiration. Careless of every moral consideration, he had never dipped his hands in blood. He had lived in the midst of a profoundly corrupt society from his earliest youth. He knew that poisonings were frequent amid the gilded wickedness and hollow misery of the Roman aristocracy. He knew that they had been far from infrequent in the House of Cæsar, and that Eudemus, the physician of Drusus, son of the Emperor Tiberius, had poisoned his lord. Yet before the cool hardihood of Agrippina's criminality he stood secretly appalled. Would it not have been better for him, after all, to have followed the example of Narcissus, and to have remained faithful to his master? How long would he be necessary to the Empress and her son? And when he ceased to be useful, what would be his fate?

Agrippina read his thoughts in his face, and said, 'I suppose that Claudius is still lingering over the wine cup. Conduct me back to him. Acerronia, my lady-in-waiting, will follow us.'

'He has been carried to his own room,' said Pallas; 'but if you wish to see him, I will attend you.'

He led the way, and gave the watchword of the night to the Prætorian guards and their officer, Pudens. The room of the Emperor was only across the court, and the slaves and freedmen and pages who kept watch over it made way for the Augusta and the all-powerful freedman.

'The Emperor still sleeps,' said the groom of the chamber as they entered.

'Good,' answered Agrippina. 'You may depart. We have business to transact with him, and will await his wakening. Give me the lamp. Acerronia will remain without.'

The slave handed her a golden lamp richly chased, and left the chamber. There on a couch of citron-wood lay the Emperor, overcome, as was generally the case in the evening, with the quantities of strong wine he had drunk. His breathing was deep and stertorous; his thin grey hairs were dishevelled; his purple robe stained, crumpled, and disordered. His mouth was open, his face flushed; the laurel wreath had fallen awry over his forehead, and, in the imbecile expression of intoxication, every trace of dignity and nobleness was obliterated from his features.

They stood and looked at him under the lamp which Agrippina uplifted so that the light might stream upon his face.

'Sot and dotard!' she exclaimed, in low tones, but full of scorn and hatred. 'Did not his own mother, Antonia, call him "a portent of a man"? I am not surprised that my brother Gaius once ordered him to be flung into the Rhone; or that he and his rude guests used to slap him on the face, and pelt him with olives and date-stones when he fell asleep at the table. I have often seen them smear him with grape juice, and draw his stockings over his hands, that he might rub his face with them when he awoke! To think that such a man should be lord of the world, when my radiant Nero, so young, so beautiful, so gifted, might be seated on his throne for all the world to admire and love!'

'The Emperor has learning,' said Pallas, looking on him with pity. 'His natural impulses are all good. He has been a very kind and indulgent master.'

'He ought never to have been Emperor at all,' she answered, vehemently. 'That he is so is the merest accident. We owe no thanks to the Prætorian Gratus, who found him hidden behind a curtain on the day that my brother Gaius was murdered, and pulled him out by the legs: still less thanks to that supple intriguing Jew, Herod Agrippa, who persuaded the wavering senate to salute him Emperor. Why, all his life long he has been a mere joke. Augustus called him "a poor little wretch," and as a boy he used to be beaten by a common groom.'

'He has been a kind master,' said the freedman once more; and as he spoke he sighed.

The Empress turned on him. 'Will you dare to desert me?' she said. 'Do you not know that, at this moment, Narcissus has records and letters in his possession which would hand me over to the fate of Messalina, and you to the fate of the noble C. Silius?'

'I desert you not,' he answered, gloomily; 'I have gone too far. But it is dangerous for us to remain alone any longer. I will retire.'

He bowed low and left the room, but before he went out he turned and said, very hesitatingly, 'He is safe with you?'

'Go!' she answered, in a tone of command. 'Agrippina does not use the dagger; and there are slaves and soldiers and freedmen at hand, who would come rushing in at the slightest sound.'

She was alone with Claudius, and seeing that it would be many hours before he woke from his heavy slumber, she gently drew from his finger the beryl, engraved with an eagle — the work of Myron — which he wore as his signet ring. Then she called for Acerronia, and, throwing over her face and figure a large veil, bade her show the ring to the centurion Pudens, and tell him to lead them towards the entrance of the Palace prisons, as there was one of the prisoners whom she would see.

Pudens received the order and felt no surprise. He who had anything to do with the Palace knew well that the air of it was tremulous with dark intrigues. He went before them to the outer door of the subterranean cells, and unlocked it. Even within the gate slaves were on guard; but, although no one recognised the veiled figure, a glance at the signet ring sufficed to make them unlock for her the cell in which Locusta was confined.

Agrippina entered alone. By a lamp of earthenware sat the woman who had played her part in so many crimes. She was imprisoned on the charge of having been concerned in various murders, but in those awful times she was too useful to be put to death. The phials and herbs which had been her stock-in-trade were left in her possession.

'I need,' said the Empress, in a tone of voice which she hardly took the trouble to disguise, 'a particular kind of

poison: not one to destroy life too suddenly; not one which will involve a lingering illness; but one which will first disturb the intellect, and so bring death at last.'

'And who is it that thus commands?' asked Locusta, lifting up to her visitor a face which would have had some traces of beauty but for its hard wickedness. 'It is not to everyone that I supply poisons. Who knows but what you may be some slave plotting against our lord and master, Claudius? They who use me must pay me, and I must have my warrant.'

'Is that warrant enough?' said Agrippina, showing her the signet ring.

'It is,' said Locusta, no longer doubtful that her visitor was, as she had from the first suspected, the Empress herself. 'But what shall be my reward, Aug—'

'Finish that word,' said the Empress, 'and you shall die on the rack to-morrow. Fear not, you shall have reward enough. For the present take this;' and she flung upon the table a purse full of gold.

Suspiciously yet greedily the prisoner seized it, and opening it with trembling fingers saw how rich was her guerdon. She went to a chest which lay in the corner of the room and, bending over it with the lamp, produced a small box, in which lay some flakes and powder of a pale yellow colour.

'This,' she said, 'will do what you desire. Sprinkle it over any well-cooked dish, and it will not be visible. A few flakes of it will cause first delirium, then death. It has been tested.'

Without a word Agrippina took it, and, slightly waving her hand, glided out of the cell. Acerronia awaited her, and Pudens again went before them towards the apartments of the Empress and her ladies.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRIME

'Une grande reine, fille, femme, mère de rois si puissants.' — BOSSUET, *Oraison Funèbre d'Henriette de France.*

'Boletos . . . optimi quidem hos cibi, sed immenso exemplo in crimen adductos.' — PLINY, *N. H.* xxii. 46.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the evening which we have described. Claudius, worn out with the heavy cares of state, to which he always devoted a conscientious, if somewhat bewildered, attention, had fallen into ill health, which was increased by his unhappy intemperance. Unwilling at all times to allow himself a holiday, even in his advancing years, he had at last been persuaded to visit Sinuessa, near the mouth of the River Vulturnus, in the hope that its charming climate and healing waters might restore him to his usual strength. He had there enjoyed a few days of quiet, during which his suspicions had been lulled to sleep by the incessant assiduities of Agrippina. His children had accompanied him, and Agrippina had been forced to conceal the furious jealousy with which she witnessed the signs of affection which he began to lavish upon them. She did not dare to delay any longer the terrible crime which she had for some time meditated. She stood on the edge of a precipice. There was peril in every day's procrastination. What if Pallas, whose scruples she had witnessed, should feel an impulse of repentance — should fling himself at his master's feet, confess all, and hurry her to execution, as Narcissus had hurried Messalina? The weak mind of Claudius was easily stirred to suspicions. He had already shown marked signs of uneasiness. Halotus, Xenophon, Locusta — they knew all. Could so frightful a secret be kept? Might not any whisper or any accident reveal it? If she would end this harassing uncertainty and reap the glittering reward of crime, there must be no delay.

She had intended to carry out the fatal deed at Sinuessa, but Claudius felt restless; and as a few days of country air had refreshed his health and spirits, he hurried back to Rome on October 13, A.D. 54. She felt that, if she was not prompt, Narcissus, the vigilant guardian of his master, might return, and the opportunity might slip away for ever.

They had scarcely reached the Palace when she bade Acerronia to summon Halotus to her presence as secretly as possible.

The eunuch entered — a wrinkled and evil specimen of humanity, who had grown grey in the household of Claudius.

'The Emperor,' she said, 'is far from well. His appetite needs to be enticed by the most delicate kinds of food. You will see that his tastes are consulted in the supper of this evening.'

'Madam,' said the slave, 'there is nothing of which the noble Claudius is fonder than boletus mushrooms. They are scarce, but a small dish of them has been procured.'

'Let them be brought here, that I may see them.'

Halotus returned in a few moments, followed by a slave, who set the mushrooms before her on a silver dish, and retired. They were few in number, but one was peculiarly fine.

'I will consult the physician Xenophon, whether they will suit the Emperor's health,' said Agrippina. 'He is in attendance.'

Passing into an adjoining room, which was empty, she hastily drew from her bosom the little box which Locusta had given her, and sprinkled the yellow flakes and powder among the sporules on the pink inner surface of the mushroom. Then returning she said,

'Halotus, this dainty must be reserved for the table of the Emperor alone, and I design this mushroom particularly for him. He will be pleased at the care which I have taken to stimulate his appetite. And if I have reason to be satisfied with you, your freedom is secured — your fortune made.'

The eunuch bowed; but as he left the room he thrust his tongue into his cheek, and his wrinkled face bore an ugly smile.

The evening came. The supper party was small, for Claudius still longed for quiet, and had been glad, in the re-

tirement of Sinuessa, to lay aside the superb state of the imperial household. Usually when he was at Rome the hall was crowded with guests; but on this day he had desired that only a few friends should be present. At the *sigma*, or semicircular table at which he reclined, there were no others except Agrippina, who was next to him, Pallas, Octavia, and Nero. Burrus, the commander of the Prætorian camp, was in attendance, and Seneca, Nero's tutor; but they were at another sigma, with one or two distinguished senators who had been asked to meet them.

Except Halotus and Pallas, there was not one person in the room who had the least suspicion of the tragedy which was about to be enacted. Yet there fell on all the guests one of those unaccountable spells of silence and depression which are so often the prelude to great calamities. At the lower table, indeed, Burrus tried to enliven the guests with the narrative of scenes which he had witnessed in Germany and Britain in days of active service, and told once more how he had received the wound which disabled his left hand. But to these stories they listened with polite apathy, nor could they be roused from their languor by the studied impromptus of Seneca. At the upper table Nero, startled by a few vague words which his mother had dropped early in the day, was timid and restless. The young Octavia — she was but fourteen years old — was habitually taciturn in the presence of her husband, Nero, who even in these early days had conceived an aversion, which he was not always able to conceal, for the bride who had been forced upon him by his mother's ambition. Claudius talked but little, for he was intent, as usual, on the pleasures of the table, and all conversation with him soon became impossible, as he drained goblet after goblet of Massic wine. Agrippina alone affected cheerfulness as she congratulated the Emperor on his improving health, and praised the wisdom which had at last induced him to yield to her loving entreaties, and to take a much-needed holiday.

'And now, Cæsar,' she said, 'I have a little surprise for you. There is, I know, nothing which you like better than these rare boleti. They are entirely for ourselves. I shall take some; the rest are for you, especially this — the finest I could procure.'

With her own white and jewelled hand she took from the dish the fatal mushroom, and handed it to her husband. He greedily ate the dainty, and thanked her. Not long after he looked wildly round him, tried in vain to speak, rose from the table, and, staggering, fell back into the arms of the treacherous Halotus.

The unfortunate Emperor was carried out of the triclinium by his attendants. Such an end of the banquet was common enough after he had sat long over the wine, but that he should be removed so suddenly before the supper was half over was an unwonted circumstance.

The slaves had carried him into the adjoining Nymphæum, a room adorned with rare plants, and were splashing his face with the water of the fountain. Xenophon was summoned, and gave orders that he should be at once conveyed to his chamber. The guests caught one last glimpse of his senseless form as the slaves hurriedly carried it back through the dining-hall.

Seneca and Burrus exchanged terrified glances, but no word was spoken until Agrippina whispered to Pallas to dismiss the guests. He rose, and told them that the Emperor had suddenly been taken ill, but that the illness did not seem to be serious. A night's rest would doubtless set him right. Meanwhile the Empress was naturally anxious, and as she desired to tend her suffering husband, it was better that all strangers should take their farewell.

As they departed, they heard her ordering the preparation of heated cloths and fomentations, as she hurried to the sick room. The Emperor lay gasping and convulsed, sometimes unconscious, sometimes in a delirium of agony; and it was clear that the quantities of wine which he had drunk might tend to dilute the poison, possibly even to counteract its working. Hour after hour passed by, and Claudius still breathed. Xenophon, the treacherons physician, saw the danger. Assuring those present in the chamber of the dying man that quiet was essential to his recovery, he urged the Empress to have the room cleared, and to take upon herself the duties of nurse. His commands were obeyed, and under pretence that he might produce some natural relief by irritating the throat, Xenophon sent for a large feather. The feather of a flamingo was brought, and when the slaves had retired, he

smeared it with a rapid and deadly poison. The effect was instant. The swollen form of the Emperor heaved with the spasm of a last struggle, and he lay dead before them.

Not a tear did Agrippina shed, not one sigh broke from the murderess, as her uncle and husband breathed his last.

'It must not be known that he is dead,' she whispered. 'Watch here. I will give out that he has fallen into a refreshing sleep, and will probably awake in his accustomed health. Fear not for your reward; it shall be immense when my Nero reigns. But much has first to be done.'

She hurried to her room, and despatched messengers in all directions, though it was now near midnight. She sent to the Priests, bidding them to offer vows to all the gods for the Emperor's safety; she ordered the Consuls to convoke the Senate, and gave them secret directions that, while they prayed for Claudius, they should be prepared for all emergencies. Special despatches were sent to Seneca and Burrus. The former was to prepare an address which Nero might, if necessary, pronounce before the Senate; the latter was to repair to the Palace at earliest dawn and await the issue of events.

Meanwhile she gave the strictest orders that the Palace gates should be guarded, and that none should be allowed to enter or to leave unless they could produce written permission. All this was easy for her. The Palace was full of her creatures. Britannicus and Octavia had been gradually deprived of nearly all who were known to be faithful to their interests. They were kept in profound ignorance that death had robbed them of the one natural protector, who loved them with a tenderness which had often been obscured by the bedazed character of his intellect, but which had never been for one moment quenched. All that they learnt from the spies and traitors who were placed about their persons was that the Emperor had been taken suddenly ill, but was already recovering, and was now in a peaceful slumber.

Having taken all these precautions, and secured that no one except Pallas or herself should be admitted during the night into the room where Xenophon kept watch beside the corpse, Agrippina retired to her chamber. One thing alone troubled her. Before she retired she had looked for a moment on the nightly sky, and saw on the far horizon a

gleam unknown to her. She called her Greek astrologer and asked him what it was. He paused, and for a moment looked alarmed. 'It is a comet,' he said.

'Is that an omen of disaster?'

The learned slave was too politic to give it that interpretation. 'It may,' he said, 'portend the brilliant inauguration of a new reign.'

She was reassured by the answer, and laid herself down to rest. Though greatly excited by the events of the day, and the immense cares which fell upon her, she slept as sweetly as a child. No pale faces looked in upon her slumber; no shriek rang through her dreams; no fancy troubled her of gibbering spectre or Fury from the abyss. She had given orders that she should be awakened in a few hours, and by the time that the first grey light shuddered in the east she had dressed herself in rich array, and, with a sense of positive exultation, stepped out of her room, calm and perfumed, to achieve that which had been for years the main ambition of her life.

CHAPTER V

THE MOCKERY OF DEATH

'Esse aliquos Manes et subterranea regna

. . . . . .

Nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum ære lavantur,
Sed tu vera puta.'—Juv. *Sat.* ii. 149–153.

Agrippina had long contrived to secure the absolute devotion of her slaves, clients, and freedmen. In that vast household of at least sixteen hundred persons, all courteously treated and liberally paid, there were many who were ready to go any lengths in support of their patroness. Among them was the freedman Mnester, who knew but little of her crimes, but was enthusiastic in her interests. She made constant use of him on that eventful day.

Among her slaves were some of the Chaldæai and casters of horoscopes, so common in those times, in whom she placed a superstitious confidence. Her first care was to consult them, and she determined to take no overt step until they should announce that the auspicious hour had come. She then hastened to the chamber where Xenophon still kept his watch beside the man whom he had murdered. He kept that watch with perfect indifference. His was a soul entirely cynical and atheistic; greedy of gain only, casehardened by crime. The bargain between him and the Empress was perfectly understood between them. Enormous wealth would be the price of his silence and success; death would punish his failure.

There was nothing to be seen but the dead form covered from head to foot by a purple coverlet.

She pointed to it. 'He must still be supposed to be alive,' she said. 'The Chaldæans say that the omens are still inauspicious. How are we to keep the secret for some hours longer?'

'Asclepiades teaches,' answered the physician, with the scarcely veiled sneer which marked his tone of voice, 'how good it is that the pains of dying men should be dissipated by comedy and song. The Empress can order some comedians to play in the adjoining chamber. If they cannot avail the divine Claudius, they will at least serve to amuse my humble self, and I have now been in this room for many hours.'

'Does any one suspect that he is dead?'

'No, Augusta,' he answered. 'To dissipate the too suspicious silence, I have occasionally made curious sounds, at which I am an adept. They will delude any chance listener into the belief that my patient is still alive.'

For a moment her soul was shocked by the suggestion of sending for the mummers. But she saw that it would help to prevent the truth from leaking out. For one instant she lifted the purple robe and looked on the old man of sixty-four, who had thus ended his reign of fourteen years. She dropped it over the features, which, in the majesty of death, had lost all their coarseness and imbecility, and showed the fine lineaments of his ancestors. The moment afterwards she was sorry that she had done it. That dead face haunted all her after life.

Leaving the chamber without a word, she gave orders that, as the Emperor was now awake, and had asked for something to amuse him, some skilled actors of comedy should be sent for to play to him from the adjoining room. They came and did their best, little knowing that their coarse jests and riotous fun did but insult the sacred majesty of death. After an hour or two Xenophon, who had been laughing uproariously, came out, thanked them in the Emperor's name, and dismissed them.

But Agrippina had hastened to one of the audience rooms, in which the Palace abounded, and sent for Britannicus and Octavia, and for their half-sister Antonia. She embraced them with effusive fondness. It was her special object to detain Britannicus in her presence, lest if but one faithful friend discovered that Claudius was dead, he might summon the adherents of the young prince, and present him to the people as the true heir to the throne. With pretext after pretext she detained him by her side, telling him of the pride and comfort which she felt in his resemblance to the Emperor, calling him

a true Cæsar, a true Claudius. Again and again she drew him to her knee; she held him by the hand; she passed her jewelled fingers through his hair; she amused him with the pretence of constant messages to the sick-room of his father. And all the while her soul was half-sick with anxiety, for the Chaldæans still sent to say that the hour was inauspicious, and she did not fail to observe that the boy, as much as he dared to show his feelings, saw through her hypocrisy, resented her caresses. He burned to visit the bedside of his father, and was bitterly conscious that something was going on of which he and his sisters were the special victims. For he was a noble and gifted boy. Something he had of the high bearing of his race, something, too, of the soft beauty of his mother. His tutor, the grammarian Sosibius, had done for him all that had been permitted, and though Britannicus had purposely been kept in the background by the wiles of his stepmother, the teacher had managed to inspire him with liberal culture, and to enrich his memory with some grand passages of verse. Nero was more than three years his senior, and in superficial qualities and graces outshone him; but keen observers whispered that though Britannicus could not sing or paint or drive a chariot like his stepbrother, and was less fascinating in manner and appearance, he would far surpass Nero in all manly and Roman virtues. The heart of Octavia was full of unspeakable misgivings. Motherless, unloved, neglected, she had known no aspect of life except its tragedy, and none had as yet taught her any possible region in which to look for comfort under the burden of the intolerable mystery.

The morning hours passed heavily, and Agrippina was almost worn out by the strain put upon her. In vain she tried to interest Britannicus in the talking-thrush, which had greatly amused him on previous occasions. She went so far as to give him her white nightingale, which was regarded as one of the greatest curiosities in Rome. It had been bought for a large sum of money, and presented to her. Pliny, among his researches in natural history, had never heard of another.[1] At another time Britannicus would have been enraptured by so interesting and valuable a gift; but now he saw that it was the object of the Empress simply to detain him and his friends from any interference with her own designs. He thanked her

[1] Note 5. — Agrippina's white nightingale.

coldly, and declined to rob her of a possession which all Rome desired to see.

At last he grew beyond measure impatient. 'I am certain,' he said, 'that my father is very ill, and that he would wish to see me. Augusta, must I be kept in this room like a child among women? Let me go to the Emperor.'

'Wait,' she said, 'for a little longer, dear Britannicus. You surely would not waken the Emperor from the sleep which may prove to be the saving of his life? It is getting towards noon; you must be hungry. The slaves shall bring us our *prandium* here.'

It was said to save time, but Britannicus saw that it would be vain to escape. The door was beset with soldiers and with the slaves and freedmen of the Empress. Some great event was evidently at hand. The halls and corridors were full of hurrying footsteps. Outside they heard the clang of armed men, who marched down the Vicus Apollinis, and stopped at the vestibule of the Palace.

Then Pallas entered, and, with a deep obeisance, said, 'Augusta, I grieve to be the bearer of evil tidings. The Emperor is dead.'

Octavia burst into a storm of weeping at the terrible intelligence, for she had been partially deceived by the protestations of Agrippina. Britannicus sat down and covered his face with his hands. He had always assumed that he would at least share the throne with the youth whom Claudius, at the wearying importunities of his mother, had needlessly adopted, and had repented of having adopted. But he loved his father, who had always been kind to him, and at that dreadful moment no selfish thought intruded on his anguish. After the first burst of sorrow, he got up from his seat, and tenderly clasped the hand of his sister.

'Octavia,' he said, 'we are orphans now — fatherless, motherless, the last of our race. We will be true to each other. Take courage. Be comforted. Antonia,' he added, gently taking his half-sister by the hand, 'I will be a loyal brother to you both.'

CHAPTER VI

THE ACCESSION OF NERO

'Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi!'

'Agrippina terris alterum venenum, sibique ante omnes, Neronem suum dedit.' — PLINY, *N. H.* xxii. 46.

AGRIPPINA did not attend any longer to the children of Claudius; she threw off the mask. For by this time the sundial on the wall marked the hour of noon, and the Chaldæans were satisfied with the auspices. Her quickened sense of hearing caught the sounds for which she had long been listening. She heard the Palace doors thrown open. She heard the voice of Burrus commanding the soldiers to salute their Emperor. She heard shout on shout, 'Nero Emperor! Nero Emperor! Long live Nero! Long live the grandson of Germanicus!'

She sprang out into the balcony, and there caught one glimpse of her son. His fair face was flushed with pride and excitement; the sun shone upon his golden hair which flowed down his neck; his slight but well-knit limbs were clothed in the purple of an Emperor. She saw him lean on the arm of the Prætorian Præfect as, surrounded by some of the chief military tribunes, he walked to the guard-house of the cohort which protected the imperial residence.

'Prætorians,' said Burrus, in a loud voice, 'behold your Emperor, Nero Claudius Cæsar.'

'Nero?' asked one or two voices. 'But where is Britannicus?'

They looked round. No one was visible but Nero, and their question was drowned in the cheers of their comrades.

'Bring out the richest lectica,' they cried; and it was ready in an instant. Nero was placed in it, and Burrus, springing on his war-horse, and followed by the select cohort

of imperial cavalry, rode by his side. The Præfect was in full armour, and his cuirass was enriched with gems and gold. He held his drawn sword in his hand, lifting it again and again to excite the soldiers to louder cheers.

Then followed the very delirium of Agrippina's triumph. Messenger after messenger entered to tell her that the air was ringing with endless acclamations in honour of her son. The beautiful and happy youth promised to the soldiers the same donative of fifteen sestertia to each man which Claudius had given at his succession, and the guardsmen accepted him with rapture, and hastily swore to him their oaths of allegiance.

Then with gleaming ensigns, and joyous songs, and shouting, and clapping of hands, they bore him in long procession to the Senate House, to obtain the ratification which the Conscript Fathers dared not refuse. At first, indeed, there had been a few shouts, 'Britannicus! Where is Britannicus? Where is the true son of Claudius?' And she inwardly made a note of the fact that the centurion Pudens and the knight Julius Densus had been among the number of those who raised the shout. Britannicus, too, had heard the cry, faint as it was by comparison; but when he attempted to escape out of the room, Agrippina imperiously waved him back, and Pallas detained him by the arm. He sat down in despair, and once more covered his face with his hands, while now it was the turn of Octavia to caress and comfort him. But the plot was already accomplished. The few who would have favoured his cause seemed to be swept away by the general stream. The boy had been kept so designedly in the background, that many of the people hardly knew whether he was alive or dead. He felt that he was powerless, and he had heard among the shouts of the soldiers the cry, 'All hail, Augusta! All hail, the daughter of our Germanicus!' He resigned himself to his fate, and Agrippina, intent on her own plans, and absorbed in the intensity of her emotions, no longer noticed his presence.

Suddenly, however, he started from his seat, and stood before her. His face was pale as death, but his eyes shone with indignant light.

'Why am not I, too, proclaimed Emperor?' he exclaimed. 'I do not believe that my father meant to rob me of my inheritance. I am his son, not his *adopted* son. This is a

conspiracy. Where is my father's will? Why is it not taken to the senate, and there recited?'

The Empress was amazed at the sudden outburst. Was this the boy who seemed so meek and so helpless? This must be seen to!

'Foolish boy,' she said; 'you are but a child. You have not yet assumed the manly garb. How can a boy like you bear the burden of the world's empire? Fear not; your brother Nero will take care of you.'

'Take care of me!' repeated Britannicus, indignantly, restraining with difficulty the torrent of wild words which sprang to his lips. 'It is a conspiracy!' he cried. 'You have robbed me of my inheritance to give it to your son Ahenobarbus.'

Agrippina lifted up her arm as if she would have struck him, but Pallas interposed. Firmly, but not ungently, he laid his hand on the young prince's mouth.

'Hush,' he said, 'ere you do yourself fatal harm. Boy, these questions are not for you or me to settle. They are for the Senate, and the Prætorians, and the Roman people. If the soldiers have elected Nero, and the senators have confirmed their choice, he is your Emperor, and you must obey.'

'It is useless to resist, my brother,' said Octavia, sadly. 'Our father is dead. Narcissus has been sent away. We have none to help us.'

'None to help you, ungrateful girl!' said Agrippina. 'Are not you now the Empress? Have you not the glory of being Nero's bride?'

Octavia answered not. 'Our father is dead,' she said again. 'May we not go, Augusta, and weep by his bedside?'

'Go!' answered Agrippina; 'and I for my part will see that he is enrolled among the gods, and honoured with a funeral worthy of the House of Cæsar.' Then, turning to her attendants, she issued her orders.

'Put a cypress at the door of the Palace. Let the body be dressed in imperial robes, and incense burned in the chamber. See that every preparation is made for a royal funeral, and that the flute-players, the wailing-women, the *designatores*, with their black lictors, be all in readiness.'

But while Agrippina was giving directions to the *archimimus* who was to represent the dead Emperor at the funeral,

and was examining the waxen masks of his ancestral Claudii, which were to be worn in the procession, the boy and girl were permitted to visit the chamber of the dead. They bent over the corpse of their father, and fondled his cold hands, and let their tears fall on his pale face, and felt something of the bitterness of death in that sudden and shattering bereavement, which changed for ever the complexion of their lives.

Nero, meanwhile, was addressing the Senate amidst enraptured plaudits in the finely turned and epigrammatic phrases of Seneca, which breathed the quintessence of wise government and Stoic magnanimity. He would rule, he said, on the principles which guided Augustus; and the senators seemed as if they would never end their plaudits when to the offer of the title 'Father of his Country' he modestly replied, 'Not till I shall have deserved it.'

Agrippina, after having ordered the details of the funeral procession, finally dismissed her murdered husband from her thoughts, and gave directions that her son, on his return to the Palace, should be received with a fitting welcome. She summoned all the slaves and freedmen of that mass of dependants which made of the Palace not a household, but a city. They were marshalled in throngs by their offices and nationalities in the vast hall. They were arrayed in their richest apparel, and were to scatter flowers and garlands under the feet of the new Emperor as he advanced. The multitudes of the lowest and least distinguished slaves were to stand in the farther parts of the hall; next to them the more educated and valuable slaves, and next to them the freedmen. In the inner ring were placed all the most beautiful and accomplished of the pages, their long and perfumed curls falling over their gay apparel, while some who had the sweetest voices were to break out into a chorus of triumphal songs. Then Nero was to be conducted to the bath, and afterwards a sumptuous banquet was to be served to a hundred guests. There was but a short time for these preparations; but the wealth of the Cæsars was unbounded, and their resources inexhaustible, and since the slaves were to be counted by hundreds, and each had his own minute task assigned to him, everything was done as if by magic.

The afternoon was drawing in when new bursts of shouting proclaimed that, through the densely crowded streets, in which

every lattice and balcony and roof was now thronged with myriads of spectators, Nero was returning from the Curia to the Palace with his guard of Prætorians.

Walking between the two Consuls, with Burrus and Seneca attending him in white robes, followed by crowds of the greatest Roman nobles, and by the soldiers clashing their arms, singing their rude songs, and exulting in the thought of their promised donative, the young ruler of the world returned. The scene which greeted him when the great gates of the Palace were thrown open was gay beyond description. The atrium glowed in zones of light and many-coloured shadow. The autumnal sunbeams streamed over the gilded chapiters, glancing from lustrous columns of yellow and green and violet-coloured marble, and lighting up the open spaces adorned with shrubs and flowers. The fountains were plashing musically into marble and alabaster basins. Between rows of statues, the work of famed artificers, were crowded the glad and obsequious throngs of the rejoicing house.

Agrippina was seated on a gilded chair of state at the farther end of the hall, her arms resting on the wings of the two sphinxes by which it was supported. She was dressed in the chlamys, woven of cloth of gold, in which Pliny saw her when she had dazzled the spectators as she sat by the side of Claudius in the great festival at the opening of the Emissarium of the Fucine Lake. Beneath this was her rich *stola*, woven of Tarentine wool and scarlet in colour, but embroidered with pearls. It left bare from the elbow her shapely arms, which were clasped with golden bracelets enriched with large stones of opal and amethyst.

The moment that she caught sight of her son she descended from her seat with proud step, and Nero advanced to meet her. He was bending to kiss her hand, but the impulses of nature overcame the stateliness of Roman etiquette, and for one instant mother and son were locked in each other's arms in a warm embrace, amid the spontaneous acclamations of the many spectators.

That evening Agrippina had ascended to the giddiest heights of her soaring ambition. Her son was Emperor, and she fancied he would be as clay in her strong hands. Alone of all the great Roman world it would be her unspeakable glory that she was not only the descendant of emperors,

but the sister, the wife, and the mother of an Emperor. She was already Augusta and Empress in title, and she meant with almost unimpeded sway to rule the world. And while she thus let loose every winged wish over the flowery fields of hope, and suffered her fancy to embark on a sea of glory, the thought of her husband lying murdered there in an adjoining room did not cast the faintest shadow over her thoughts. She was about to deify him, and to acquire a sort of sacredness herself by becoming his priestess — was not that enough? She sat revolving her immense plans of domination, when Nero joined her, flushed from the banquet, and weary with the excitement of the day. While he was bidding her good night, and they were exchanging eager congratulations on the magnificent success of his commencing rule, the tribune of the Palace guard came to ask the watchword for the night.

Without a moment's hesitation Nero gave as the watchword, THE BEST OF MOTHERS.

But late into the darkness, in the room of death, unnoticed, unasked for, Britannicus and Octavia mingled their sad tears and their low whispers of anguish, beside the rapidly blackening corpse of the father who had been the lord of the world. Yesterday — though his impudent freedmen had for years been selling, plundering, and murdering in his name — two hundred millions of mankind had lifted up their eyes to him as the arbiter of life and death, of happiness and misery. By to-morrow nothing would be left but a handful of ashes in a narrow urn. Of all who had professed to love and to adore him, not one was there to weep for him except these two; for their half-sister, Antonia, had been content merely to see the corpse, and had then retired. No one witnessed their agony of bereavement, their helplessness of sorrow, except the dark-dressed slave who tended the golden censer which filled the death chamber with the fumes of Arabian incense. And for them there was no consolation. The objects of their nominal worship were shadowy and unreal. The gods of the heathen were but idols, of whom the popular legends were base and foolish. Such gods as those had no heart to sympathise, no invisible and tender hand to wipe away their orphan tears.

CHAPTER VII

SENECA AND HIS FAMILY

'Palpitantibus præcordiis vivitur.' — SENECA, *Ep.* lxxii.

'Sæculo premimur gravi,
Quo scelera regnant.'

ID. *Octav.* act. ii.

IF there was one man in all Rome whom the world envied next to the young Emperor, or even more than the Emperor himself, it was his tutor, Seneca. He was the leading man in Rome. By the popular critics of the day his style was thought the finest which any Roman had written, though the Emperor Gaius, in one of his lucid intervals, had wittily remarked that it was 'sand without lime.' His abilities were brilliant, his wealth was immense. In all ordinary respects he was innocent and virtuous — he was innocence and virtue itself compared with the sanguinary oppressors and dissolute Epicureans by whom he was surrounded on every side.

But his whole life and character were ruined by the attempt to achieve an impossible compromise, which disgraced and could not save him. A philosopher had no place in the impure Court of the Cæsars. To be at once a Stoic and a minister of Nero was an absurd endeavour. Declamations in favour of poverty rang hollow on the lips of a man whose enormous usury poured in from every part of the Empire. The praises of virtue sounded insincere from one who was living in the closest intercourse with men and women steeped in unblushing wickedness. And Seneca was far from easy in his own mind. He was surrounded by flatterers, but he knew that he was not ranked with patriots like Pætus Thrasea, and genuine philosophers like Cornutus and Musonius Rufus. Unable to resist temptations to avarice and ambition, he felt a deep misgiving that the voice of posterity would honour their perilous independence, while it spoke doubtfully of his endless compromises.

Yet he might have been so happy! His mother, Helvia, was a woman who, in the dignity of her life and the simplicity of her desires, set an example to the matrons of Rome, multitudes of whom, in the highest circles, lived in an atmosphere of daily intrigue and almost yearly divorce. His aunt, Marcia, was a lady of high virtue and distinguished ability. His wife, Paulina, was tender and loving. His pretty boy, Marcus, whose bright young life was so soon to end, charmed all by his mirthfulness and engaging ways. His gardens were exquisitely beautiful, and he never felt happier than when he laid aside his cares and amused himself by running races with his little slaves. His palace was splendid and stately, and he needed not to have burdened himself with the magnificence which gave him no pleasure and only excited a dangerous envy. It would have been well for him if he had devoted his life to literature and philosophy. But he entered the magic circle of the Palace, and with a sore conscience was constantly driven to do what he disapproved, and to sanction what he hated.

Short as was the time which had elapsed since the death of Claudius, he was already aware that in trying to control Nero he was holding a wolf by the ears. Some kind friend had shown him a sketch, brought from Pompeii, of a grasshopper driving a griffin, and he knew that, harmless as it looked, the griffin was meant for himself and the grasshopper for Nero. Men regarded him as harnessed to the car of the frivolous pupil whom he was unable to control.

He was sitting in his study one afternoon, and the low wind sounded mournfully through the trees outside. It was a room of fine proportions, and the shelves were crowded with choice books. There were rolls of vellum or papyrus, stained saffron-colour at the back, and fastened to sticks of ebony, of which the bosses were gilded. All the most valuable were enclosed in cases of purple parchment, with their titles attached to them in letters of vermilion. There was scarcely a book there which did not represent the best art of the famous booksellers, the Sosii, in the Vicus Sandalarius, whose firm was as old as the days of Horace. A glance at the library showed the taste as well as the wealth of the eminent owner — the ablest, the richest, the most popular, the most powerful of the Roman senators.

They who thought his lot so enviable little knew that his

pomp and power brought him nothing except an almost sleepless anxiety. Every visitor who came to him that morning spoke of subjects which either tortured him with misgivings or vexed him with a touch of shame.

The first to visit Seneca that day was his brother Gallio, with whom he enjoyed a long, confidential, and interesting conversation. Gallio, to whom every one gave the epithet of 'sweet' and 'charming,' and of whom Seneca said that those who loved him to the utmost did not love him enough, had recently returned from the proconsulship of Achaia. He had just been nominated Consul as a reward for his services. The brothers had much to tell each other. Gallio described some of his experiences, and made Seneca laugh by a story of how a Jewish Rabbi had been dragged before his tribunal by the Jews of Corinth, who were infuriated with him because he had joined this new, strange, and execrable sect of Christians. This Jew's name was Paulus, and his countrymen accused him of worshipping a malefactor who, for some sedition or other — but probably only to please the turbulent Jews — had been crucified, in the reign of Tiberius, by the Procurator Pontius Pilatus.

'I naturally refused to have anything to do with their abject superstition,' said Gallio.

'Abject enough,' answered Seneca; 'but is our mythology much better?'

Gallio answered with a shrug of the shoulders.

'They are the gods of the mob,' he said, 'not ours; and they are useful to the magistrates.'

'A new god has recently been added to their number,' said Seneca, 'the divine Claudius.'

'Yes,' said Gallio, significantly; 'he has been dragged to heaven with a hook! But you have not let me finish my story. It appears that this Paulus was a tent-maker, and for some reason or other, in spite of his absurd beliefs, he had gained the confidence of Erastus, the city chamberlain, and of a great many Greeks; for, strange to say, he had — so I am told — preached a very remarkable and original code of ethics. It is almost inconceivable that a man can hold insane doctrines, and yet conform to a lofty morality. Yet such seems to have been the case with this strange person. I looked at him with curiosity. He was dressed in the common Eastern costume of the Jews, wearing a turban and a coarse striped robe flung

over his tunic. He was short, and had the aquiline nose and general type of Judaic features. But though his eyes were sadly disfigured by ophthalmia, there was something extraordinary about his look. You know how those Jews can yell when once their Eastern stolidity is roused to fury. Even in Rome we have had some experience of that; and you remember how Cicero was once almost terrified out of recollection of his speech by the clamour they made, and had to speak in a whisper that they might not hear what he said. To stand in the midst of a mob of such dirty, wildly gesticulating creatures, shouting, cursing, waving their garments in the air, flinging up handfuls of dust, is enough to terrify even a Roman. I, as you know, am a tolerably cool personage, yet I was half appalled, and had to assume a disdainful indifference which I was far from feeling. But this man stood there unmoved. If he had been a Regulus or a Fabricius he could not have been more undaunted, as he looked on his infuriated persecutors with a glance of pitying forgiveness. Every now and then he made a conciliatory gesture, and tried to speak; but though he spoke in Hebrew, which usually pacifies these fanatics to silence, they would not listen to him for an instant. But the perfect dignity, the nobleness of attitude and aspect, with which that worn little Jew stood there, filled me with admiration. And his face! that of Pætus Thrasea is not more striking. The spirit of virtue and purity, and something more which I cannot describe, seemed to breathe from it. It is an odd fact, but those Jews seem to produce not only the ugliest and the handsomest, but also the best and worst of mankind. I sat quiet in my curule chair, and let the Jews yell, telling them once more that, as no civil crime was charged against Paulus, I refused to be a judge in matters of their superstition. At last, getting tired, I ordered the lictors to clear the prætorium, which they did with infinite delight, driving the yelling Jews before them like chaff, and not sparing the blows of their fasces. I thought I had done with the matter then; but not at all! It was the turn of the Greeks now. They resented the fact that the Jews should be allowed to make a riot, and they sided with Paulus. He was hurried by his friends into a place of safety; but the Greeks seized the head of the Jewish Synagogue — a fellow named Sosthenes — and administered to him a sound beating underneath my very tribunal.'

'Did you not interfere?' asked Seneca.

'Not I,' said Gallio. 'On the contrary, I nearly died with laughing. What did it matter to a Roman and a philosopher like me whether a rabble of idle Greeks, most of them the scum of the Forum, beat any number of Jews black and blue? It is what we shall have to do to the whole race before long. But, somehow, the face of that Paulus haunted me. They tell me that he was educated at Tarsus, and he was evidently a man of culture. I wanted to get at him, and have a talk with him. I heard that he had been lodging in a squalid lane of the city with a Jewish tent-maker named Aquila, who was driven from Rome by the futile edict of Claudius. But my lictor either could not or would not find out the obscure haunt where he hid himself. The Christians were chary of information, and perhaps, after all, it was as well not to demean myself by talking to a ringleader of a sect whom all men detest for their enormities. If report says true, the old Bacchanalians, whose gang was broken up two hundred years ago, were nothing to them.'[1]

'I have heard their name,' said Seneca. 'Our slaves probably know a good deal more about the matter than we do, if one took the trouble to ask them. But unless they stir up a riot at Rome I shall not trouble the Emperor by mentioning them.'

At this point of the conversation a slave announced that Seneca's other brother, the knight Marcus Annæus Mela, and his son Lucan, were waiting in the atrium.

'Admit them,' said Seneca. 'Ah, brother, and you, my Lucan, perhaps it would have been a better thing for us all if we had never left our sunny Cordova.'

'I don't know that,' said Mela. 'I prefer to be at Rome, a senator in rank, though I choose the station of a knight. To be procurator of the imperial demesnes is more lucrative, as well as more interesting, than looking after our father's estates in Spain.'

'What does the poet say?' asked Gallio, turning to the young Spaniard, a splendid youth of seventeen, whose earlier poems had already been received with unbounded applause, and whose dark eyes glowed with the light of genius and pas-

[1] Note 6. — The Bacchanalians.

sion. 'Is he content to stand only second as a poet — if second — to Silius Italicus, and Cæsius Bassus, and young Persius?'

'Well,' said Lucan, 'perhaps a man might equal Silius without any superhuman merit. Persius, like myself, is still young, but I would give up any skill of mine for his delightful character. And, as for Rome, if to be a constant guest at Nero's table and to hear him read by the hour his own bad poetry be a thing worth living for, then I am better off at Rome than at Cordova.'

'His poetry is not so very bad,' said Seneca.

'Oh! it is magnificent,' answered Lucan, and, with mock rapture, he repeated some of Nero's lines: —

> 'Witness thou, Attis! thou, whose lovely eyes
> Could e'en surprise the mother of the skies!
> Witness the dolphin, too, who cleaves the tides,
> And flouncing rides on Nereus' sea-green sides;
> Witness thou likewise, Hannibal divine,
> Thou who didst chine the long ribb'd Apennine!' [1]

What assonance! What realism! What dainty euphuistic audacity! As Persius says, 'It all seems to swim and melt in the mouth!'

'Well, well,' replied the philosopher, 'at least you will admit that he might be worse employed than in singing and versifying?'

'An Emperor might be better employed,' said the young man; 'and with him I live on tenter-hooks. I heartily wish that he had never summoned me from Athens, or done me the honour of calling me his intimate friend. Frankly, I do not like him. Much as he tries to conceal it, he is horribly jealous of me. He does all he can to make me suppress my poems, though he affects to praise them; and though, of course, when he reads me his verses, I cry "*Euge!*" and "*Σοφῶς!*" at every line, as needs must when the master of thirty legions writes, yet he sees through my praise. And I really cannot always suppress my smiles. The other day he told me that the people called his voice "divine." A minute after, as though meaning to express admiration for his verses, I repeated his phrase —

> '"Thou d'st think it thundered under th' earth." [2]

[1] Note 7. — Nero's poetry.

[2] 'Sub terris tonuisse putes.'

He was furious! He took it for a twofold reflection, on his voice and on his alliteration; and I was desperately alarmed. It was hard work to pacify him with a deluge of adulation.'

Seneca sighed. 'Be careful, Lucan,' he said, 'be careful! The character of Nero is rapidly altering. At present I have kept back the tiger in him from tasting blood; but when he does he will bathe his jaws pretty deeply. It is ill jesting when one's head is in a wild beast's mouth.'

'And yet,' said Gallio, 'I have heard you say that no one could compare the mansuetude even of the aged Augustus with that of the youthful Nero.'

Seneca thought it disagreeable to be reminded of his politic inconsistencies. 'I wish to lead him to clemency,' he said, 'even if he be cruel. But he is his father's son. You know what Lucius Domitius was. He struck out the eye of a Roman knight, and he purposely ran over and trampled on a poor child in the Appian road. Have I ever told you that the night after I was appointed his tutor I dreamt that my pupil was *Caligula?*'

There was an awkward pause, and to turn the conversation, Lucan suddenly asked, 'Uncle, do you believe in Babylonians and their horoscopes?'

'No,' said the philosopher. 'The star of each man's destiny is in his heart.'

'Do you not? Well, I will not say that I do. And yet—would you like to hear what a friend told me? He said that he had been a *mathematicus* under Apollonius of Tyana.'

'Tell us,' said his father, Mela. 'I am not so wise as our Seneca, and I feel certain that there is something in the predictions of the astrologers.'

'He told me,' said Lucan, 'that he had read by the stars that, before ten years are over, you, my uncles, and you, my father, and I, and'—here the young poet shuddered—'my mother, Atilla—and all of you through my fault—would die deaths of violence. Oh, ye gods, if there be gods, avert this hideous prophecy!'

'Come, Lucan,' said Seneca, 'this is superstition worthy of a Jew, almost of a Christian. The Chaldæans are arrant quacks. Each man makes his own omens. I am Nero's tutor; you, his friend; our whole family is in the full blaze of favour and prosperity.—But, hark! I hear a soldier's footstep in the

hall. Burrus is coming to see me on important state business. Farewell, now, but sup with me this evening, if you will share my simplicity.'

'Simplicity!' answered Mela, with a touch of envy, 'your humble couches are inlaid with tortoise-shell; and your table shines with crystal and myrrhine vases embossed with gems.'

'What does it matter whether the goblets of a philosopher be of crystal or of clay?' answered Seneca gaily; 'and as for my poor Thyine tables with ivory feet, which every one talks of, Cicero was a student, and he was not rich, yet he had one table which cost 500,000 sesterces. One may surely admire the tigrine stripes and panther-like spots of the citron-wood without being a Lucullus or an Apicius.'

'But you have five hundred such tables,' said Mela, 'worth —I am afraid to say how many million sesterces.'

Seneca smiled a little uneasily. '*Accepimus peritura perituri;* we and our possessions are but for a day,' he said, 'and even calumny will bear witness that on those citron tables nothing more sumptuous is usually served to me personally than water and vegetables and fruit.'

Then with a whispered caution to Lucan to control his vehement impulses and act with care, the 'austere intriguer' said farewell to his kinsmen, and rose to greet his colleague Burrus.

CHAPTER VIII

SENECA AND HIS VISITORS

'Videtur mihi cadere in sapientem ægritudo.' — Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* iii. 4.

Burrus was a man in the prime of life, whose whole bearing was that of an honest and fearless Roman; but his look was gloomy, and those who had seen him when he escorted Nero to the camp and the senate house, noticed how fast the wrinkles seemed to be gathering on his open brow.

We need not repeat the conversation which took place between the friendly ministers, but it was long and troubled. Burrus felt, no less strongly than Seneca, that affairs at Court were daily assuming a more awkward complexion. The mass of the populace, and of the nobles, rejoicing in the general tranquillity, were happily ignorant of facts which filled with foreboding the hearts of the two statesmen. The nobles and the people praised with rapture the speech which Nero had pronounced before the Senate after the funeral honours had been paid to the murdered Claudius. 'I have,' he said, 'no wrongs to avenge; no ill feeling towards a single human being. I will maintain the purity and independence of legal trials. In the Palace there shall be no bribery and no intrigues. I will command the army, but in no particular will I encroach upon the prerogatives of the Conscript Fathers.' Critics recognised in the speech the style and sentiments of Seneca, but that only showed that at last philosophy was at the helm of state. And the Fathers had really been allowed to enact some beneficent and useful measures. It was the beginning of a period of government of which the public and external beneficence was due to Seneca and the Prætorian Præfect, who acted together in perfect harmony, and with whom Nero was too indolent to interfere. Long afterwards, so great a ruler as Trajan said that he would emulate, but

could not hope to equal, the fame of Nero's golden *quinquennium*.

But, meanwhile, unknown to the Roman world in general, the 'golden quinquennium' was early stained with infamy and blood; and the contemporary Pliny says that *all through his reign* Nero was an enemy of the human race.[1]

The turbulent ambition of Agrippina was causing serious misgivings. When the senators were summoned to meet in the Palace she contrived to sit behind a curtain and hear all their deliberations. When Nero was about to receive the Armenian ambassadors she would have scandalised the majesty of Rome by taking her seat unbidden beside him on the throne, if Seneca had not had the presence of mind to whisper to the Emperor that he should step down to meet his mother and lead her to a seat. Worse than this, she had ordered the murder, not only of Narcissus, but of the noble Junius Silanus, whose brother, the affianced suitor of Octavia before her marriage with Nero, she had already got rid of by false accusations which broke his heart. She was doubly afraid of Junius, both because the blood of Augustus flowed in his veins, and because she feared that he might one day be the avenger of his brother, though he was a man of mild disposition. She sent the freedman Helius and the knight Publius Celer, who were procurators in Asia, to poison him at a banquet, and the deed was done with a cynical boldness which disdained concealment. So ended the great-great-grandson of Augustus, whom his great-great-grandfather had just lived to see. It was only with difficulty that Seneca and Burrus had been able to stop more tragedies, and they had succeeded in making the world believe in Nero's unique clemency by the anecdote, everywhere retailed by Seneca, that when called upon to sign a death-warrant he had exclaimed, 'I wish I did not know how to write!' It was looked on as a further sign of grace that he had forbidden the prosecution of the knight Julius Densus, who was charged with favour towards the wronged Britannicus.

But now a new trouble had arisen. Nero began to seek the company of such effeminate specimens of the 'gilded youth' of Rome as Otho and Tullius Senecio. They were his ready tutors in every vice, and he was a pupil whose fatal aptitude

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* vii. 6.

soon equalled, if it did not surpass, the viciousness of his instructors.

Partly through their bad influence, he had devoted himself heart and soul to Acte, the beautiful freedwoman of Octavia. It was impossible that any secret of the Palace could long be concealed from the vigilant eyes of Agrippina. She had discovered the amour, and had burst into furious reproaches. What angered her was, not that the Emperor should disgrace himself by vice, but that a freedwoman should interfere with the supremacy of her will, and be a rival with her for the affections of her son. A little forbearance, a little calm advice, might have proved a turning point in the life of one who was not yet an abandoned libertine, but rather a shy and timid youth dabbling with his first experiences of wrong. His nature, indeed, was endowed with the evil legacy of many an hereditary taint, but if it was as wax to the stamp of evil, it was not as yet incapable of being moulded into good. But Agrippina committed two fatal errors. At first she was loudly indignant, and when by such conduct she had terrified her son into the confidence of Otho and Senecio, she saw her mistake too late, and flew into the opposite extreme of complaisance. Nero at that time regarded her with positive dread, but his fear was weakened when he saw that, on the least sign of his displeasure, she passed from fierce objurgations to complete submission. In dealing with her son, Agrippina lost the astuteness which had carried her triumphantly through all her previous designs.

But at this point Seneca also made a mistake no less ruinous. If he had remonstrated, and endeavoured to awaken his pupil to honourable ambition, it was not impossible that the world might have found in Nero a better Emperor than most of his predecessors. Instead of this, the philosopher adopted the fatal policy of concession. He even induced his cousin Annæus Serenus, the Præfect of the police, to shield Nero by pretending that he was himself in love with Acte, and by conveying to her the presents which were, in reality, sent to her by the Emperor. Seneca soon learnt by experience that the bad is never a successful engine to use against the worst, and that fire cannot be quenched by pouring oil upon it. When Nero had been encouraged by a philosopher to think lightly of immorality, the reins of his animal nature were

seized by 'the unspiritual god Circumstance,' and with mad pace he plunged into the abyss.

Burrus had come to tell Seneca that Nero's passion for Acte was going to such absurd lengths that he talked of suborning two Romans of consular dignity to swear that the slave girl, who had been brought from Asia, was in reality a descendant of Attalus, King of Pergamus! The Senate would be as certain to accept the statement as they had been to pretend belief that Pallas was a scion of Evander and the ancient kings of Arcadia; and Nero had actually expressed to Burrus a desire to divorce Octavio and marry Acte!

'What did you say to him?' asked Seneca.

'I told him frankly that, if he divorced Octavia, he ought to restore her dower.'

'Her dower?'

'Yes — the Roman Empire. He holds it because Claudius adopted him as the husband of his daughter.'

'What did he say?'

'He pouted like a chidden boy, and I have not the least doubt that he will remember the answer against me.'

'But, Burrus,' said Seneca, 'I really think that we had better promote, rather than oppose, this love-affair. Acte is harmless and innocent. She will never abuse her influence to injure so much as a fly; nay, more, she may wean Nero from far more dangerous excesses. I think that in this case a little connivance may be the truest policy. To tell you the truth, I have endeavoured to prevent scandal by removing all difficulties out of the way.'

'You are a philosopher,' said Burrus, 'and I suppose you know best. It would not have been my way. We often perish by permitted things. But, since you do not take so serious a view of this matter as I did, I will say no more. Our interview must now end. My duties at the camp require my presence. Farewell.'

Seneca, as we have seen, had spent a somewhat agitated day, but he had one more visitor before the afternoon meal. It was the philosopher Cornutus, who had been a slave in the family of the Annæi, but was now free and had risen to the highest literary distinction by his philosophical writings.

'Cornutus is always a welcome visitor,' he said, as he rose to greet him; 'never more so than this morning. I want

to consult you, in deep confidence, about the Emperor's education.'

'Can Seneca need any advice about education?' said Cornutus. 'Who has written so many admirable precepts on the subject?'

Seneca, with infinite plausibility, related to his friend the arguments which he had just used to Burrus. He felt a restless desire that the Stoic should approve of what he had done. To fortify his opinion he quoted Zeno and other eminent philosophers, who had treated graver offences than that of Nero as mere *adiaphora* — things of no real moment. Cornutus, however, at once tore asunder his web of sophistry.

'A thing is either right or wrong,' he said; 'if it is wrong no amount of expediency can sanction it, no skill of special pleading can make it other than reprehensible. The passions cannot be checked by sanctioning their indulgence, but by training youth in the manliness of self-control. You wish to prevent the Emperor from disgracing himself with the crimes which rendered execrable the reigns of Tiberius and Gaius. Can you do it otherwise than by teaching him that what he *ought* to do is also what he *can* do? Is the many-headed monster of the young man's impulses to be checked by giving it the mastery, or rather by putting it under the dominion of his reason?'

'I cannot judge by abstract considerations of ethics. I must judge as a statesman,' said Seneca, somewhat offended.

'Then, if you are only a statesman, do not pretend to act as a philosopher. I speak to you frankly, as one Stoic to another.'

Seneca said nothing. It was evident that he felt deeply hurt by the bluntness of Cornutus, who paused for a moment, regarding him with a look of pity. Then he continued.

'If it pains you to hear the truth I will be silent; but if you wish me to speak without reserve, you are committing two fatal errors. You dream of controlling passion by indulging it. You are conceding liberty in one set of vices in the vain hope of saving Nero from another. But all vices are inextricably linked together. And you have committed a second mistake, not only by addressing your pupil in language of personal flattery, but also by inflating him with a belief in his own illimitable power.' [1]

[1] Note 8.

'Nero is Emperor,' answered Seneca curtly, 'and, after all, he can do whatever he likes.'

'Yet even as Emperor he can be told the truth,' replied Cornutus. 'I for one ventured to offend him yesterday.'

'In what way?'

'Your nephew Lucan was belauding Nero's fantastic verses, and said he wished Nero would write four hundred volumes. "Four hundred!" I said; "that is far too many." "Why?" said Lucan; "Chrysippus, whom you are always praising, wrote four hundred." "Yes," I answered, "but they were of use to mankind!" Nero frowned portentously, and I received warning looks from all present; but if a true man is to turn flatterer to please an Emperor, what becomes of his philosophy?'

'Yes,' sighed Seneca: 'but *your* pupil Persius is a youth of the sweetest manners and the purest heart; whereas Nero is — Nero.'

'A finer young Roman than Persius never lived,' replied the Stoic, 'but if I had encouraged Persius in the notion that vice was harmless, Persius might have been — Nero.'

'Cornutus,' said the statesman — and as he said it he sighed deeply — 'your lot is humbler and happier than mine. I do not follow, but I assent; I am crushed by an awful weight of uncertainty, and sometimes life seems a chaos of vanities. I wish to rise to a loftier grade of virtue, but I am preoccupied with faults. All I can require of myself is, not to be equal to the best, but only to be better than the bad.'[1]

'He who aims highest,' said the uncompromising freedman, 'will reach the loftiest ideal. And surely it is hypocrisy to use fine phrases when you do not intend to put your own advice into practice.'

Seneca was always a little touchy about his style, and he was now thoroughly angry, for he was not accustomed to be thus bluntly addressed by one so immeasurably beneath him in rank. 'Fine phrases!' he repeated, in a tone of deep offence. 'It pleases you to be rude, Cornutus. Perhaps the day will come when the "fine phrases" of Seneca will still be read, though the name of Cornutus, and even of Musonius, is forgotten.'

'Very possibly,' answered the uncompromising freedman.

[1] Note 9.

'Nevertheless, I agree with Musonius that stylists who do not act up to their own precepts should be called fiddlers and not philosophers.'

When Cornutus rose to leave, the feelings of the most envied man in Rome were far from enviable. He would have given much to secure the Stoic's approval. And yet the sophistries by which he blinded his own bitter feelings were unshaken. 'Cornutus,' he said to himself, 'is not only discourteous but unpractical. Theory is one thing; life another. We are in Rome, not in Plato's Atlantis.'

Seneca lived to find out that facing both ways is certain failure, and that a man cannot serve two masters.

In point of fact the struggle was going on for the preponderance of influence over Nero. Agrippina thought that she could use him as a gilded figurehead of the ship of state, while she stood at the helm and directed the real course. Burrus and Seneca, distrusting her cruelty and ambition, believed that they could render her schemes nugatory, and convert Nero into a constitutional prince. Both efforts were alike foiled. The passions which were latent in the temperament of the young Emperor were forced into rank growth by influences incomparably less virile than that of his mother, and incomparably more vile than those of the soldier and the philosopher. Otho was a more effective tutor than Seneca, and Seneca's own vacillation paved the way for Otho's corrupting spell. Claudius had been governed by an 'aristocracy of valets;' Nero was to be governed neither by the daughter of Germanicus nor by the Stoic moralist, but by a despicable fraternity of minions, actors, and debauchees.

CHAPTER IX

NERO AND HIS COMPANIONS

'Res pertricosa est, Cotile, bellus homo.' — MARTIAL, iii. 63.

NERO had been spending the morning with some of the new friends whose evil example was rapidly destroying in his mind every germ of decency or virtue. Though it was still but noon, he was dressed in a loose *synthesis* — a dress of light green, unconfined by any girdle, and he had soft slippers on his feet. This negligence was due only to the desire for selfish comfort, for in other respects he paid extreme attention to his personal appearance. His fair hair was curled and perfumed, and his hands were covered with splendid gems.

But even a brief spell of imperial power, with late hours, long banquets, deep gambling, and reckless dissipation, had already left their brand upon his once attractive features. His cheeks had begun to lose the rose and glow of youth and to assume the pale and sodden appearance which in a few years obliterated the last traces of beauty and dignity from his ruined face.

With him sat and lounged and yawned and gossiped and flattered a choice assemblage of spirits more wicked than himself.

The room in which they were sitting was one of the most private apartments of the Palace. It had been painted in the reign of Gaius with frescoes graceful and brilliant, but such as would now be regarded as proofs of an utterly depraved taste. As he glanced at the works of art with which the chamber was decorated, Otho thought, not without complacency, of the day when the prediction made to him by an astrologer should be fulfilled, and he too would be Emperor of Rome. He highly approved of frescoes such as these, though even Ovid and Propertius had complained of their corrupting tendency.

Otho was now nearly twenty-three years old, and was a characteristic product of imperial civilisation. His face was smooth, for he had artificially prevented the growth of a beard. To hide his baldness, which he regarded as the most cruel wrong of the unjust gods, he wore a wig, so natural and close-fitting as scarcely to be recognisable, and this was arranged in front in the fashion which he set, and which Nero followed. Four rows of symmetrical curls half hid the narrow forehead. Those curls had cost his barber two hours' labour that morning, and they were dyed with a Batavian pomade into the blonde colour which was the most admired. In figure Otho was small; his legs were bowed, and his feet ill-shaped, but his large eyes and beautiful mouth gave him a sweet and engaging, though effeminate, expression. Indeed, effeminacy was his main characteristic, and there was a touch of effeminacy even in the much belauded suicide to which his destiny was leading him. When he was a boy, his father was so disgusted by his ways that he flogged him like the lowest of his slaves. He was one of those creatures of perfumed baths, delicate languor, soft manners, and disordered appetites, who, in that age, so often took refuge from a depraved life in a voluntary death.[1] He was entirely impecunious, and was loaded with debts — a circumstance which he did not regard as any obstacle to a life of boundless extravagance. In order to get introduced to Nero he had the effrontery to make love to a plain and elderly freedwoman, who had some influence at Court. When he had once secured an introduction he became the ardent friend of Nero, and the intimate accomplice of his worst dissipations. Being six years older than the Emperor, and far more accomplished in vice, he exercised a spell which rapidly undermined the grave lessons of Burrus and Seneca. Precociously corrupt, serenely egotistical, cynical in dishonour, and gangrened to the depth of his soul by debauchery, Otho, though still a youth, had so completely got rid of the moral sense as to present to the world a spectacle of unruffled self-content. A radiant and sympathetic softness reigned smiling on his smooth and almost boyish face.

By the side of Otho lounged another youth, whose name was Tullius Senecio. He was wealthy and reckless, and he had made himself a leader of fashion among the young Roman

[1] See Nisard : *Poëtes de la Décadence*, i. 91.

nobles. With them was the brilliant Petronius Arbiter, a man of refined culture and natural wit, but the most cynically shameless liver and talker even in Rome. The group was completed by the able and rough-tongued but not over-scrupulous Vestinus, the dissolute Quintianus, and the singularly handsome Tigellinus, who was as yet only at the beginning of his career, but who, of all the minions of that foul Court, became the most cruel, the most treacherous, and the most corrupt.

And yet weariness reigned supreme over these luxurious votaries of fashion. They had at first tried to get some amusement out of the antics of Massa, a half-witted boy, and Asturco, a dwarf; but when they had teased Massa into sullenness, and Asturco into tears and bellowings of rage, Petronius interfered, and voted such amusements boorish and in bad taste. Then they tried to kill time by betting and gambling over games at marbles and draughts. The 'pieces' (*latrunculi* and *ocellata*) of glass, ivory, and silver lay scattered over tables, just as they were when the players got tired of the games, and the draught boards (*tabulæ latruncularie*) had been carelessly tossed on the floor. Then they sent for plates of honey-apples, and bowls of Falernian wine, and took an extemporised meal. Nero even condescended to amuse himself with rolling little ivory chariots down a marble slab, and betting on their speed. Still they all felt that the hours were somewhat leaden-footed, till a bright thought struck the Emperor. He had passed some of his early years in poverty, and this circumstance, together with his æsthetic appreciation of things beautiful, made him delight in showing his treasures to his intimates. By way of finding something to do, he suggested to his friends that they should come and look at the wardrobes of the former empresses, which were under the charge of a multitude of dressers, folders, and jewellers. Orders were given that everything should be laid out for their inspection. Except Petronius, they all had an effeminate passion for jewellery, and they whiled away an hour in inspecting the robes, stiff with gold brocade and broideries of pearl, sapphire, and emerald.

By this time Nero was in high good-humour, and seized the opportunity of a little ostentation towards the 'lisping hawthorn-buds' of fashion by whom he was surrounded.

He chose out a superb cameo, on which was carved a Venus

Anadyomene, and gave it to Otho. 'There,' he said; 'that will adorn the neck of your fair Poppæa. Vestinus, this opal was the one for the sake of which Mark Antony procured the proscription of the senator Nonius. You don't deserve it, for you can be very rude —'

'Free speech is a compliment to strong emperors,' said Vestinus, hardly concealing the irony of his tone.

'Ah, well!' continued Nero, 'I shall not give it you for your deserts, but because it will look splendid on the ivory arm of your Statilia. A more fitting present to you would be this little viper enclosed in amber;[1] the viper is your malice, the amber your flattery. And what on earth am I to give you, Senecio? or you, Petronius? You are devoted to so many fair ladies, that I should have to give you the whole wardrobe; but I will give you, Senecio, a silken fillet embroidered with pearls; and, Petronius, Nature has set out this agate — I believe it is from the spoils of Pyrrhus — for no one but you, for she has marked on it an outline of Apollo and the Muses. Quintianus, this ring with Hylas on it will just suit you.'

There was a hidden sarcasm in much which he had said even while he distributed his gifts, and not a few serpents hissed among the flowery speeches interchanged in this bad society. But they all thanked him effusively for presents so splendid.

At this point a sudden thought suggested itself to Nero. He had not seen much of his mother for the last few days, and being in buoyant spirits, and thoroughly pleased with himself, he chose out the most splendid robe and ornaments, and bade some of the wardrobe-keepers to carry them to the apartments of the Augusta, with the message that they were a present from her son. 'And do you,' he said to his freedman Polycletus, 'bring me back word of what the Empress says in thanks.'

Nero and his friends returned to the room in which they had been sitting, and had begun to play at dice for large stakes, when Polycletus came back, flushed and excited.

Nero was himself a little uneasy at what he had done. His mother, with her unlimited resources, hardly needed a present of this kind. As long as she was Empress, all these robes had been her own; and Nero was exercising an un-

[1] Mart. iv. 59.

wonted sort of patronage when he sent this gift by the hands of an attendant. There was a certain vulgarity in his attention, which was all the worse because it was ostentatious. And yet, if Agrippina had been wise, she would have shown greater command over her temper, and have prevented that tragic widening of the 'little rift within the lute' which soon silenced the music of a mother's love.

'Well, and was the Augusta pleased?' asked Nero, looking up from his dice.

'I will report to the Emperor when he is alone,' said the freedman.

'Tush, man!' answered Nero, nervously. 'We are all friends here, and if my mother was very effusive in her compliments, they will pardon it.'

'She returned no praises and no thanks.'

'Ha! that was ungracious. Tell me exactly what she did.'

'She asked me who were with you, and I mentioned the names of those present.'

'What business is it of hers?' said Nero, reddening, as he noticed the significant glances interchanged between Otho and Vestinus, the latter of whom whispered a Greek proverb about boys tied to their mother's apron-strings.

'She then asked whether you had given any other presents, and I said that you had. "To whom?" she asked.'

'A regular cross-examination!' whispered Vestinus.

'I said that you had made presents to Otho, Vestinus, and others.'

'You need not have been so very communicative, Polycletus,' said Nero; 'but go on.'

'Her lip curled as I mentioned the names.'

'We are not favourites of the Augusta, alas!' lisped Otho.

'But what did she say about the robe?'

'She barely glanced at the robe and jewels, and when she had finished questioning me, she stamped her foot, tossed the dress over a seat, and scattered the gems over the floor.'

Nero grew very red, and as the freedman again remained silent, he asked whether the Augusta had sent no message.

Polycletus hesitated.

'Go on, man!' exclaimed Nero, impatiently. 'In any case *you* are not to blame for anything she said.'

'I am ashamed to repeat the Augusta's words,' said the

messenger. 'But, if I must tell you, she said: "My son gives a part to me, who have given all to him. Whatever he has he owes to me. He sends me these, I suppose, that I may put in no claim to the rest. Let him keep his finery. There are things that I value more highly." And then she rose, and spurning with her foot the robe which lay in her way, she swept out of the room.'

Nero bit his lip, and his eyes gleamed with rage. He was maddened by the meaning smiles of Senecio, and the expression of cynical amusement which passed over the face of Petronius.

Otho came to the rescue. 'Do not be disturbed, Nero,' he said. 'Agrippina only forgot for the moment that you are now Emperor.'

'The Augusta evidently thinks that you are still a boy in the purple-bordered toga,' sneered Tigellinus.

Nero dashed down his dice-box, overturned the table at which they were sitting, and began to pace the room in extreme agitation. He had not yet quite shaken off the familiarity of his mother's dominance. He was genuinely afraid of her, and he knew to what fearful lengths she might be hurried by her passion and her hate.

'I cannot stand it,' he muttered to himself. 'I am no match for Agrippina. Who knows but what she may prepare a mushroom, or something else, for me? I hate Rome. I hate the Empire. I will lay aside the purple. I only want to enjoy myself. I will go to Rhodes and live there. I can sing, if I can do nothing else, and if all else fails, I will support myself with singing in the streets of Alexandria. The astrologers have promised me that I shall be king in Jerusalem, or somewhere in the East. Here I am utterly wretched.'

He flung himself angrily on a couch, and a red spot rose upon his cheeks. 'I wonder how she dares to insult me thus! If I had sent the robe and jewels to Octavia, the poor child would have touched heaven with her finger. If I had sent them to Acte, her soft eyes would have beamed with love. Of what use is it to be Emperor, if my mother is to flout and domineer like this?'

'Does not Cæsar know what gives her this audacity?' asked Tigellinus, in a low tone

'No,' answered Nero; 'except it be that she has ruled me from a child.'

'It is,' said the adventurer, 'because Pallas abets her, and because —'

He paused.

'Pallas? Who is Pallas?' said the Emperor. 'An ex-slave — nothing more. I am not afraid of him. I will dismiss him at once, and if he gives the least trouble, I will threaten him with an inquisition into his account. He shall go and end his Pallas-ship.[1] But what else were you going to say?'

'Agrippina domineers,' he whispered in the Emperor's ear, 'because Britannicus is alive.'

'Britannicus?' answered Nero.

He said no more, but his brow became dark as night.

[1] Note 10.

CHAPTER X

PRINCE BRITANNICUS.

'We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind,
But such a day to-morrow as to-day,
And to be boy eternal.'
SHAKESPEARE, *The Winter's Tale*, i. 2.

THERE were few youths in Rome more deserving of pity than the son of Claudius. Britannicus saw himself not only superseded, but deliberately neglected and thrust into the background. The intrigues of his stepmother had succeeded, and he, the true heir to the Empire, was a cipher in the Palace of the Cæsars. The suite of apartments assigned to his use and that of his immediate attendants was in one of the least frequented parts of the Palace. He often heard from the banquet hall and reception rooms, as he passed by them unnoticed, the sounds of revelry, in which he was only allowed on rare occasions to participate. Agrippina, in her varying moods, treated him sometimes with studied coolness and insulting patronage, sometimes with a sort of burning and maudlin affection, as though she were touched by the furies of remorse. The latter mood was more intolerable to him than the former. Sometimes, when she strained him to her steely heart, he felt as if he could have thrust her from him with loathing, and he made his relations with her more difficult because he was too little of an actor to conceal his dislike. Nero usually met him with sneering banter, but he, too, at times, seemed as though he would like to be treated by him with at least the semblance of brotherly cordiality. He found his chief comfort in the society of Octavia. She was, nominally, the Empress, and Nero, though he shunned her to the utmost of his power, had not yet dared to rob her of the dignities which surrounded her exalted rank. It was in the company of his sister that Britannicus spent his happiest hours. Octavia, as often as

she dared, invited him to be present on festive occasions, and in her apartments he could find refuge for a time from the most detested of the spies with whom his stepmother had surrounded him from his early boyhood.

There was but one person about him whom he really trusted and loved. It was the centurion Pudens, who, being one of the imperial guard called *excubitores*, was often stationed at one point or other of the Palace. So vast was the interior of that pile of architecture, so intricate its structure, owing to the numerous additions which had been made to it by each succeeding Emperor, that for a boy bent, as Britannicus was, on occasionally eluding the intolerable watchfulness of his nominal slaves, it was not difficult to conceal his movements. Happily, too, he had one boyish friend whom he loved, and who loved him, with entire affection. It was Titus, the elder son of Vespasian. Even as a boy he gave promise of the fine moral qualities by which he was afterwards distinguished. His father was a soldier who had risen by merit to high command, and had even been Consul; but his grandfather was only a humble provincial, and, as his family was poor, he little dreamed that he too was destined to the purple of which his friend had been deprived. He was only a month or two older than Britannicus. They shared the same studies and the same games, and there was something contagious in his healthy vigour and imperturbable good humour. It was at least some alleviation to the sorrows of the younger boy that this manly and virtuous lad, with his short curly hair and athletic frame, was always ready to exert himself to brighten his loneliness and divert his thoughts. Painters might have called the features of Titus plebeian, but in his eyes and mouth there was an expression of honesty and sweetness which endeared him to the heart of the lonely prince, who admired him far more than any of the boys in the noblest families.

The political insignificance of the Flavian family had been one reason why Agrippina had chosen Titus as a companion for the son of Claudius, instead of some scion of the old aristocracy of Rome. It was well for Britannicus that his fellow-pupil came of a race purer and simpler than that of the youthful patricians.

The two boys had been educated together for some years; and Titus, when he became Emperor, still retained a fond

affection for the companion of his youth, to whom he erected an equestrian statue. There was a story, known to very few, which might have endangered the life of Titus, had it been divulged. One day, when the two boys were learning their lessons together, Narcissus had brought in one of the foreign physiognomists who were known as *metoposcopi*, to look at them from behind a curtain. The man did not know who they were; he only knew that they were in some way connected with the Palace. After carefully studying their faces, he said that the elder of the two, Titus, should certainly become Emperor, but the younger as certainly should not. At that time Britannicus was heir to the throne. Narcissus was superstitious, and his heart misgave him; but he derived some comfort from the absurd improbability of a prophecy that a boy who had been born in so humble a house, and was only the descendant of a Cisalpine haymaker, should ever wear the purple of the Cæsars. He was too kind-hearted to let the anecdote be generally known, for even as a boy Titus was liked by every one, if he was not yet 'the darling of the human race.'

One day, as Titus went across the viridarium, or chief green court of the Palace, he saw a little slave-boy struggling hard to repress his sobs. His kindly nature was touched by the sight. He had not been trained in the school of those haughty youths who thought it a degradation to speak to their slaves; his father, Vespasian, being himself of lowly origin, held, with Seneca, that slaves, after all, were men, and might become dear and faithful friends.

'What is your name, and why do you weep, my little man?' asked Titus.

'They call me Epictetus,' said the child; 'and I am the slave of Epaphroditus, the Emperor's secretary. I fell and hurt my leg very badly against the marble rim of the fountain. Don't be angry with me. I will bear the pain.'[1]

'A born Stoic!' said Titus, smiling. 'But what is the matter with your leg?'

'I will tell you, sir,' answered Epictetus. 'Being deformed and useless, as you see, my master thought that he might turn me to some account by having me taught philosophy, and he made me *capsarius*[2] to his son, who attends the lectures of Musonius Rufus. Musonius, who is kind and good, let me sit

[1] Note 11. [2] A slave who carried boys' books to school.

in a corner and listen. I am not a Stoic yet, but I shall try to be one some day.'

'But even now you have not told me how you came to be lame.'

The young slave blushed. 'Eight weeks ago,' he said, 'I was walking past the door of the triclinium, when a slave came out with some crystal vases on a tray. He ran against me, and one of the vases fell and was broken. He charged me with having broken it, and Epaphroditus ordered my leg to be twisted. It hurt me terribly, but Musonius had taught me to endure, and I only cried out, "If you go on, you will break my leg." He went on, and broke it. I did not give way then, and I am ashamed that you saw me crying now.'

'Poor lad! Come with me to Prince Britannicus and tell him that story. He is kind, and will pity you, and perhaps get the Empress Octavia to do something for you.'

Epictetus limped after Titus, and Britannicus was pleased with the slave-boy's quaint fortitude and the preternatural gravity of his face. He often sat on the floor while the two friends talked or played at draughts, and would sometimes retail to them what he had heard in the lectures of Musonius. They laughed at his *naïveté*, but something of the teaching stuck. The Stoicism of Titus had its germ in those boyish days.

One other friend, strange to say, Britannicus had near at hand, though she could not openly have much conversation with him. It was the fair freedwoman Acte. Her situation in the Palace did not argue in her a depraved mind. She had not been trained in an atmosphere which made her suppose that there was anything sinful in her relations with the Emperor. Brought from Asia in early youth, she was practically no more than a slave, though she had been emancipated by Claudius. The will of a master, even if that master was far below an Emperor, was regarded as a necessary law.[1] But Acte had a good heart, and so far from being puffed up by the ardent affection of Nero, her one desire was to use her influence for the benefit of others. For Britannicus she felt the deepest pity. She had even aroused the anger of her lover by pleading in his behalf, and though it was impossible that she should do more than interchange with him an occasional

[1] Note 12. — Slaves.

salutation, the boy gratefully recognised that Acte did her best to gain for him every indulgence and relaxation in her power.

Britannicus had inherited some of his father's fondness for history. He was never happier than when Titus told him some of the stories which he had heard from Vespasian about his campaigns in Britain. He had even persuaded Pudens to go with him to visit the old British chief, Caractacus — or, to give him his right name, Caradoc — who had kept the Romans at bay for nine years, until he was betrayed to them by the treacherous Queen Cartismandua. And much had come of this visit; for there Pudens saw for the first time the daughter of Caradoc, the yellow-haired British princess Claudia, and had fallen deeply in love with her. The grey King of the Silures, whose manly eloquence had moved the admiration of Claudius on the day when he had been led along in triumph, was eating away his heart in a strange land. He rejoiced to see the son of the Emperor who had spared his life, and he delighted the boy's imagination with many a tale of the Druids, and Mona, and the wild Silurian hills and the vast rushing rivers, and the hunting of the wolf and the wild-boar in the marshes and forests of Caer Leon and Caer Went. While Caractacus was telling these stories there was ample opportunity for Pudens to improve his acquaintance with the fair Claudia, who talked to him with a yearning heart of her home on the silver Severn, which Pudens had once visited as a very young soldier.

These interviews made Britannicus eager to form the acquaintance of Aulus Plautius, the conqueror of the southern part of that far island. Plautius stood well at Court, and had been greatly honoured by Claudius, who had condescended to walk by his side in the ovation which rewarded the successful campaigns of four years. Britannicus gained easy permission to visit the old general, and at his house he met his wife, Pomponia Græcina.

This lady was regarded at Rome as a paragon of faithful friendship. She had been deeply attached in early youth to her royal kinswoman Julia, the granddaughter of Tiberius Julia had been one of the victims of the cruelty of Messalina, and from the day of her execution, for forty years, Pomponia never appeared but in mourning garments, and it was said,

though without truth, that she never wore a smile upon her face.

But though she smiled but rarely, the beauty of Pomponia was exquisite from her look of serenity and contentment. She was unlike the other ladies of Roman society. She never tinged her face with walnut juice, or painted it with rouge and cerussa, or reared her tresses into an elaborate edifice of curls, or sprinkled them with gold dust, or breathed of Assyrian odours. Her life and her dress were exquisitely simple. She wore no ornaments, or few. She rarely appeared at any banquet, and then only with her husband at the houses of the graver and more virtuous senators. Vice was involuntarily abashed at her presence. The talk which Roman matrons sometimes did not blush to hear was felt to be impossible where Pomponia was present, nor would any one have dreamed of introducing loose gymnasts or Gaditanian dancers as the amusement of any guests of whom she was one. Hence she was more and more neglected by the jewelled dandies and divorced ladies, who fluttered amid the follies of a heartless aristocracy, and gradually the gossiping pleasure-hunters of Rome came to hate her because her whole life was a rebuke of the degradation of a corrupt society.

Hatred soon took the form of whispered accusations. The suspicion was first broached by Calvia Crispinilla, a lady whose notoriously evil character elevated her high in the confidence of Nero, and who, in spite of her rank, was afterwards proud of the infamy of being appointed keeper of the wardrobe of his favourite Sporus.

Talking one day to Ælia Petina, a divorced wife of Claudius and mother of his daughter Antonia, she expressed her dislike of Pomponia, and said, 'It is impossible that any worshipper of our gods should live a life so austere as Pomponia's. Hark, in your ears, Petina. She must be'— and sinking her voice to a tragic whisper she said — 'she must be a secret Christian.'

'Well,' said Petina, 'what does it matter? Nero himself worships the Syrian goddess, and they say that the lovely Poppæa Sabina, the wife of Otho, is a Jewess.'

'A Jewess! oh, that is comparatively respectable,' said Crispinilla. 'Why, Berenice, the charming sister — ahem! the very deeply attached sister — of Agrippa, you know, is a Jewess; and what diamonds that woman has! But a Chris-

tian! Why, the very word has a taint of vulgarity about it, and leaves a bad flavour in the mouth! None but unspeakable slaves and cobblers and Phrygian runaways belong to those worshippers of the god Onokoites and the head of an ass.'[1]

What malice had invented as a calumny happened in this instance to be a truth. Pomponia was indeed a secret Christian. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and none can tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth. She had accompanied her husband when he had been sent to subdue Britain, and had known the agonies of long and intensely anxious separation from him, and during those periods of trial she had been compelled to be much alone, and part of the time she had spent in Gaul. Persis, her confidential handmaid, had met one of the early missionaries of the faith, had heard his message, had been converted. Accident had revealed the fact to the noble Roman lady; and as she talked with Persis in many a long and lonely hour, her heart too had been touched by grace, and a life always pure had now become the life of a saint of God.

Plautius was glad to notice the manly interest taken by Britannicus in the country from which his name had been derived, and in martial achievements rather than in the debasing effeminacies of the Roman nobles. He always welcomed the boy's presence, and introduced him to the kind hospitalities of his wife. Both parents were glad that a scion of the Cæsars who seemed to show the old Roman virtues of modesty and manliness should be a frequent companion of their own son, the young Aulus. To Pomponia the son of Claudius felt strongly drawn. She was wholly unlike any type of woman he had ever seen; she seemed to be separated by whole worlds of difference from such ladies as his own mother, Messalina, or his stepmother, Agrippina; and though she only dressed in simple and sombre garments, yet the peace and sweetness which breathed from her countenance made her more lovely in his eyes than the great wives of Consuls and senators whom he had so often seen sweeping through gilded chambers on the Palatine in their gleaming and gold-embroidered robes. He noticed, too, that his sister, the Empress Octavia, never visited her without coming home in a happier and more contented mood.

[1] Note 13. — Onokoites.

One day, being more than ever filled with admiration for her goodness, he had spoken to her freely of all his bitter trials, of all his terrible misgivings. She had impressed on him the duties of resignation and forgiveness; and had tried to show him that in a mind conscious of integrity he might have a possession better and more abiding than if he sat amid numberless temptations to baseness on an uneasy throne.

'You speak,' he said, 'like Musonius Rufus; for the young Phrygian slave, Epictetus, whom Titus took compassion on and sometimes brings to our rooms, has told me much about his Stoic lectures. But there is something — I know not what — in your advice which is higher and more cheerful than in his.'

Pomponia smiled. 'Much that Musonius teaches is true and beautiful,' she said; 'but there is a diviner truth in the world than his.'

Britannicus was silent for a moment, and then, hesitatingly and with reluctance, he said, 'Will you forgive me, noble Pomponia, if I ask you a question?'

The pale countenance of the lady grew a shade paler, and she replied, 'You might ask me what I should not think it right to answer.'

'You know,' said the boy, 'that at banquets and other gatherings I cannot help hearing the gossip and scandal which they talk all the day long. And all the worst ladies — persons like Crispinilla and Petina and Silana — seem to hate you, I know not why; and they said that you would be accused some day of holding a foreign superstition.'

Pomponia clasped her hands, and uttered a few words which Britannicus could not hear. Then, turning to him, she said, 'Perhaps Musonius has quoted those lines of Cleanthes, "Lead me O Father of the world. I will follow thee, even though I weep."[1] We can never prevent the wicked from accusing us, but we can always give the lie to their accusations by innocent lives.'

'What they said besides, *must* have been an absurd and wicked lie,' continued Britannicus. 'They said' — and here he made the sign of averting an evil omen which has been prevalent in Italy from the earliest days — 'that — you — were — dare I speak the vulgar word? — a Christian.'

[1] Note 14. — Lines of Cleanthes.

'And what do you know about the Christians, Britannicus?'

'In truth I know very little, for I am not allowed to go about much; but Titus, who hears more than I do, tells me that they meet at night, and kill a babe, and drink its blood; and bind themselves by horrid oaths; and tie dogs to the lamp-stands, and hark them on to throw over the lamps, and are afterwards guilty of dreadful orgies. And they worship an ass's head.'

'What makes you believe that slanderous nonsense?'

'Why, Titus is fond of scratching his name on the wall, and when we were going out of the pædagogium in the House of Gelotius, which, you know, is now used as a training school for the pages, he scrawled *Titus Flavius Vespasianus leaves the pædagogium*, and then drew a little sketch of a donkey, and underneath it *Toil, little ass, as I have done, and it will do you good.* I laughed at him for scribbling on the wall, and to make fun of him I wrote underneath —

'"I wonder, oh wall, that your stones do not fall,
Bescribbled all o'er with the nonsense of all."

And I told him that I should put up a notice like that at the Portus Portuensis, which begs boys and idlers not to scarify (*scarificare*) the walls. But while I was writing the lines, I caught sight of an odd picture which some one had scratched there. It was a figure with an ass's head on a cross, and underneath it "Alexamenos adores God." I asked Titus what it meant, and suggested that it was a satire on the worship of the Egyptian Anubis. But Titus said, "No! that is intended to annoy the Christians."'[1]

'Well, Britannicus,' said Pomponia, 'I know something more about these poor Christians than that. All these are lies. I dare say you have read, or Sosibius has read to you, some of the writings of Seneca?'

'No,' said Britannicus, reddening. 'Seneca is my brother Nero's tutor. It is he, and Agrippina, and Pallas, who have done away with the will of my father, Claudius. I don't care to hear anything he says. He is not a true philosopher, like Musonius or Cornutus. He only writes fine things which he does not believe.'

'A man may write very true things, Prince,' said Pomponia,

[1] Note 15. — Ancient wall-scribblings.

'yet not live up to them. I have here some of his letters, which his friend Lucilius has shown me. Let me read you a few passages.'

She took down the scroll of purple vellum, on which she had copied some of the letters, and, unrolling it, read a sentence here and there: —

'"*God is near you, is with you, is within you. A sacred spirit dwells within us, the observer and guardian of all our evil and our good; there is no good man without God.*"

'"*What advantage is it that anything is hidden from man? Nothing is closed to God.*"

'"*Even from a corner it is possible to spring up into heaven. Rise, therefore, and form thyself into a fashion worthy of God.*"

'"*Do you wish to render the gods propitious? Be virtuous; to honour them it is enough to imitate them.*"

'"*You must live for another, if you wish to live for yourself.*"

'"*In every good man, God dwells.*"[1]

'I could read you many more thoughts like these from Seneca's letters. Are they not true and beautiful?'

'I wish his own acts were as true and beautiful,' answered Britannicus. 'But what has this to do with the Christians?'

'This: every one of those thoughts, and many much deeper, are commonplaces among Christians; but the difference between them and the worshippers of the gods is that they possess other truths which make these *real*. They alone are innocent.'

'And they do not worship an ass's head? Well, at any rate, Christus or Chrestus, whom they do worship, was crucified in Palestine by Pontius Pilatus.'

'And does suffering prevent a man from being divine? All Romans worship Hercules, yet they believe, or profess to believe, that he was burnt alive on Œta.'

Britannicus was silent, for he had always thought it a colossal insanity on the part of the Christians to worship one who had been crucified like a slave.

'Tell me,' said Pomponia, 'when Epictetus reads you his notes of the lectures of Musonius, does not the name of Socrates sometimes occur in them?'

[1] For these and similar passages of Seneca, see *Epp.* 31, 41, 73; *De Benef.*, i. 6; &c.

'Yes,' said the young prince; 'it occurs constantly. Musonius talked of Socrates as a perfect pattern, and all but divine.'

'And was not Socrates almost a pauper?'

'I suppose so,' said Britannicus.

'And how did Socrates die?'

'He was poisoned by the Athenians with hemlock in their common prison.'

'As a malefactor?'

'Yes.'

'Does it, then, prove him to be worthless that he, too, died the death of a felon? And are all philosophers fools for extending so much reverence to a poisoned criminal?'

'I never thought of that,' said Britannicus.

'And are all the other stories about these Christians lies?' he asked, after a pause.

'They are,' said Pomponia. 'Some day, perhaps, you shall judge for your own self.'

CHAPTER XI

'A FOREIGN SUPERSTITION'

'Quos, per flagitia invisos, vulgus Christianos appellabat.' — TACITUS, *Ann.* xv. 44.

THE young son of Claudius, burdened as he was by a sense of wrong, was not only cheered by the kindness of the conqueror of Britain, but had been deeply interested in all that he had heard from his high-minded wife. Pomponia had warned him that to mention the subject of their conversation might needlessly imperil her life, and to no one did he venture to say a word on the subject except to Pudens. It struck him that in the words and bearing of the handsome young soldier there was something not unlike the moral sincerity which he admired and loved in Pomponia Græcina.

'Pudens,' he said to him the next morning, when Titus was absent, 'what do you think of the Christians?'

Pudens started; but, recovering himself, he said, coldly, 'The Christians in Rome are humble and persecuted. Most persons confuse them with the Jews, but many Jews are nobler specimens than the beggars on the bridges, and many Christians are not Jews at all.'

'Are they such wretches as men say?'

'No, Britannicus, they are not. A man may call himself a Christian, and be a bad man; but it is so perilous to be a Christian that most of them are perfectly sincere. They preach innocence, and they practise it. You know well enough that the air is full of lies, and certainly not one-tenth part of what is said of the Christians has in it the least truth.'

The time had not yet come for Pudens to avow that his Claudia had been secretly baptised by an early missionary in Britain, as Pomponia had been in Gaul; and that he himself was beginning seriously to study the doctrines of the hated sect.

But the next time Britannicus was able to visit Pomponia, he asked her if there were any Christian books which he might read.

'There are the old Jewish books,' said Pomponia, 'which Christians regard as sacred, and which a few Romans have read out of curiosity, for they were translated into Greek nearly four hundred years ago. But they are rare, and it is not easy to get them. And even if you read them, there is much in them which we Romans cannot understand.'

'But has no Christian written anything?'

'Scarcely anything,' she said. 'You know the Christians are mostly very poor, and some of them quite illiterate. But there is a great Christian teacher named Paulus of Tarsus, and many who have heard him preach in Ephesus and in Philippi, and even in Athens and Corinth, say that his words are like things of life. My friend Sergius Paulus, the late Proconsul of Cyprus, has met him, and spoke of him with enthusiastic reverence. He has written nothing as yet except two short letters to the Christians in Thessalonica. They are only casual *letters*, and do not enter into the life of Jesus the Christ, or the general belief of Christians. But I have them here, and will read parts of them to you if you like.'

She read to him the opening salutation, and on his expressing astonishment that he could join 'much affliction' with 'joy,' she explained to him that this was the divine paradox of all Christianity, in which sorrow never destroyed joy, but sometimes brought out a deeper joy, even as there are flowers which pour forth their sweetest perfumes in the midnight.

Then she read him the exhortations to purity and holiness,[1] and asked him 'whether that sounded like the teaching of men who practised the evil deeds of which the Christians were accused by the popular voice.'

He sat silent, and she read him the passage about the coming day of the Lord, and the sons of light, and the armour of righteousness.[2] Lastly, she read him the concluding part of the Second Letter, with its exhortations to diligence and order.

'I think,' she said, 'that in one passage Paulus may perhaps refer in a mysterious way to your father, the late Emperor. He is speaking of the coming of some lawless tyrant and

[1] 1 Thess. iv. 1–8. [2] 1 Thess. v. 1–11.

enemy of God before the day of the Lord; and he adds, "only *he who letteth* will let, until he be taken away."'

'The Greek words ὁ κατέχων,' she said, 'might be rendered in Latin *qui claudit*. The Christians are so surrounded by enemies that they are sometimes obliged to express themselves in cryptograms, and Linus tells me that some Christians see in the words *qui claudit* an allusion to your father, Claudius. If so, Paulus seems to think that the day of the Lord's return is very near.'

The young prince, though he had but a dim sense of what some of the phrases meant, was struck with what he had heard. There was something in the morality more vivid and more searching than anything which Epictetus had reported, or than Sosibius had read to him out of Zeno and Chrysippus. And besides the high morality there were tones which caused a more thrilling chord to vibrate within him than anything of which he had yet dreamed. The morality seemed to be elevated to a purer region of life and hope, and, in spite of the strange style, to be transfused through and through with a divine emotion.

'And these,' he said, 'are the men whom they charge with every kind of atrocity! Surely, Pomponia, the world is rife with lies! Would it be too dangerous for you to let me see and speak to some of the Christian teachers? You might disguise me; it is quite easy. Even Pudens need not know; he never feels dull,' he added with a smile, 'if he may talk to Claudia, who is staying with you now.'

'There was an excellent Jewish workman here named Aquila of Pontus,' she said. 'You might have talked to him, but he left Rome when the Jews were banished in your father's days. He used to mend the awning over the viridarium, and those which kept the sun from blazing too hotly into our Cyzicene room.[1] He sometimes brought with him his still more excellent wife, Prisca. They knew Paulus, and said that he had promised some day to come to Rome. I am obliged to be very careful; but perhaps you can speak to Linus, who is the Elder of the Christians in Rome.'

'But, Pomponia, the Christians believe, you tell me, in a leader named Jesus; is he the same as Christus or Chrestos?'

[1] Note 16. — Cyzicene room.

'He is.'

'Is there any one in Rome who has seen him?'

'He was put to death,' said Pomponia, bowing her head, 'more than twenty years ago, when Tiberius was Emperor. But His disciples, who lived with Him, whom He called Apostles or messengers, were many of them young men, and they are living still.'

'Had Paulus of Tarsus ever seen him?'

'In heavenly vision, yes; but not when He was teaching in Palestine. But there was one disciple whom He loved very dearly, and who is now living in Jerusalem, though Agrippa I. beheaded his elder brother. Perhaps he may some day come to Rome.'

'But you, Pomponia, must have heard much about Christus. Tell me, then, something about him. How could a Judæan peasant be, as you say Jesus was, divine?'

'Self-sacrifice for the sake of others is always divine,' said Pomponia. 'Even in Greek mythology the gods assume the likeness of men in order to help and deliver them. Does not the poet tell us how Apollo once kept, as a slave, the oxen of Admetus? how Hercules was the servant of Eurystheus? how Jupiter came to visit Baucis and Philemon? Is it so strange that the God of all should reveal Himself to man as man? Doubtless you have read with your tutor the grandest play of Æschylus — the "Prometheus Bound." Does not the poet there sing that Prometheus, who is the type of humanity, can never be delivered *until some god descends for him into the black depths of Tartarus?* And does not Plato say that man will never know God until He has revealed Himself in the guise of suffering man; and that "when all is on the verge of destruction, God sees the distress of the universe, and, placing himself at the rudder, restores it to order"?[1] And does not Seneca teach that man cannot save himself?[2] Seneca even says, "Do you wonder that men go to the gods? God comes to men — yea, even into men." No one laughs at such thoughts in the most popular of our philosophers; why should they laugh at Christians for believing them?'

'But what made his disciples believe that Christus was a Son of God?' he asked.

[1] Plat. *Politicus*, § 16; comp. *Phædo*, § 78.

[2] Note 17.— The unconscious prophecies of heathendom.

Sitting quietly there, she told him, that day, of the Jews as the people who had kept alive for centuries the knowledge of the one true God; of their age-long hopes of a Deliverer; of their prophecies; and of the coming of the Baptist. On his next visit she told him of Jesus, and read to him parts of one of the old sketches of His ministry which were current, in the form of notes and fragments, among Christians who had heard the preaching of Peter or other Apostles. Lastly, she told him some of His miracles, and the story of His death and resurrection. 'He spake,' she said, 'as never man spake. He did what man never did. Above all, He rose from the dead the third day. Even the centurion who watched the crucifixion returned to Jerusalem and said, "Truly this was a Son of God!"'

Britannicus felt almost stunned by the rush of new emotions. His mind, like that of most boys of his age at Rome, was almost a blank as regards any belief in the old mythology. In Stoicism he had found some half-truths which attracted his Roman nature; but its doctrines were stern, and proud, and harshly repressive of feelings which he felt to be natural and not ignoble. Here, at last, in Christianity, he heard truths which, while they elevated the character of man even to heaven — while they kindled his aspirations and fortified his endurance — were suited also to soothe, to calm, to console. He had heard them to the best advantage. They had been told him, not by lips of untaught slaves and humble workmen. but by the noblest of Roman matrons. She spoke in Latin worthy of the best days of Cicero, and adorned all she said not only by the sweetness of her voice and the grace of her language, but also by her broad sympathies and her cultivated intelligence. Most of all, her words came weighty with the consistency of a life which, in comparison with that of the women around her, shone like a star in the darkness. It was this beauty of holiness which won him first and most. He saw it in Pudens, whom he suspected of stronger Christian leanings than he had acknowledged. He saw it conspicuously in Claudia,

'A flower of meekness on a stem of grace,'

before whose beautiful personality the tinsel compliments of her many admirers seemed to sink into shamed silence. The

precocious maidens of the great consular families hated Claudia because, in her white and simple dress, and her long natural fair hair, unadorned by a single flower or gem, she outshone their elaborate beauty. Yet they saw, and were astonished to see, that no youth — not even an Otho or a Petronius or any of the most hardened libertines — dared to speak a light word to one who looked as chaste as 'the consecrated snow on Dian's lap.'

Britannicus did not venture to breathe a word to Titus of a secret which was not his own; but there was one person from whom he could have no secret, and that was the young Empress, his sister Octavia. When he could be secure that no spy was at hand, that no ear was listening at the door, that no eye was secretly watching him, he would talk to her with wonder and admiration of all that he had heard. She was no less impressed than he, and without venturing to embrace the new faith, both sister and brother found a vague source of hope and strength in what they had learnt from Pomponia. To them it was like a faint rose of dawn, seen from a dark valley, shining far off upon the summit of icy hills. And as they learnt more of what the Gospel meant, and learnt even to pour forth dim prayer into the unknown, they were able to discover, by certain signs, that not a few of the slaves in the household of Cæsar — Patrobas, Eubulus, Philologus, Tryphæna, and others — were secret Christians. The manner in which they discovered that these slaves were Christians was very simple. Pomponia, implicitly trusting the young Cæsar, had ventured to teach him the Greek Christian watchword, *Ἰχθύς*, 'fish.' [1] The brother and sister found that if, in the presence of several slaves, they brought in this word in any unusual manner, a slave who was a Christian would at once, if only for a second, glance quickly up at them. When they had thus assured themselves of the religion of a few of their attendants, whom they invariably found to be the most upright and trustworthy, they would repeat the word again, in a lower voice and a more marked manner, when they passed them; and if the slave in reply murmured low the word *ἰχθύδιον* or *pisciculus* (i. e. little fish), they no longer felt in doubt. The use which they made of their knowledge was absolutely innocent. Often they did not say a word more on

[1] Note 18.

the subject to their slaves and freedmen. Only they knew that, among the base instruments of a wicked tyranny by whom they were on every side surrounded, there was at least a presumption that these would be guilty of no treacherous or dishonourable deed.

And thus, while Agrippina was growing daily more furious and discontented; while Seneca and Burrus were plunged into deeper and deeper anxieties; while Pætus Thrasea, and Musonius, and Cornutus found it more and more necessary to clothe themselves in the armour of a despairing fortitude; while Nero was sinking lower and lower into the slough of vice — Octavia and Britannicus began to draw nearer to the Unknown God, and found that when the sea of calamity does not mingle its bitter waters with the sea of guilt, calamity itself might be full of divine alleviations. Agrippina and Nero were provoked by their appearance and bearing. The last thing which they would have suspected was that the Christianity which, in common with all Rome, they regarded as an execrable superstition, should have found its way into patrician circles — should even have met with favourable acceptance under the roof of the Cæsars. When they saw the disinherited Britannicus playing ball in the tennis-court, or beating his young fellow-pupils in races in the gardens, or wrestling not unsuccessfully with the sturdy and ruddy Titus, they were astonished to think that a boy who had been robbed of all his rights should be poor spirited enough to throw himself into enjoyments in which his merry and musical laugh often rang out louder than that of any of his companions. What hope or what consolation could sustain him? They jealously fancied that some plot must be afoot; but suspicion was disarmed by the boy's transparent frankness and innocence of manner. And Octavia — they treated her as a nullity; they permitted themselves to indulge in every sneer and slight which they could devise. More than once Nero, fresh from some revel and lost to shame, had seized her by her long, dark tresses, or struck her with his brutal hand. Yet no passionate murmur had betrayed her resentment. What could be the secret of a beatitude which no misfortunes seemed wholly able to destroy?

CHAPTER XII

ONESIMUS

'Non tressis agaso.' — PERSIUS, v. 76.

BUT we must now turn for a time from the Palace of the Emperor and the grand houses of the nobles crowded with ancestral images, gleaming with precious marbles, enriched with Greek statues of priceless beauty, to the squalid taverns and lodging-houses of the poorest of that vast and mongrel populace which surged through the streets of Rome.

It was not an Italian populace, but was composed of the dregs of all nations, which had been flowing for several generations into the common sewer of Rome. It congregated in all the humbler and narrower streets; in the Velabrum it bawled mussels and salt fish for sale; it thronged the cook-shops of the Esquiline; it crowded densely into the cheaper baths; it swarmed in the haunts of vice which gave so bad a name to the Subura. Long ago the Syrian Orontes had flowed into the Tiber, and brought with it its flute-players, and dancers, and immoralities.[1] Long ago, when the Forum loungers dared to howl at him, the great Scipio had stormed at them as step-sons of Italy — as people who had no father and no mother — and bidden them to be silent.

The city was almost as much a Greek as it was a Roman city. But, besides this, it abounded in Orientals. Here would be heard the shaken sistra of the Egyptian Serapis, whose little temple in the Campus Martius was crowded by credulous women. Here you would be met by the drunken Galli of the Phrygian Cybele, whose withered, beardless faces, cracked voices, orgiastic dances, and gashings of themselves with knives, made their mendicancy more offensive than the importunities of the beggars who lounged all day about the Sublician and Fabrician bridges, or half-stormed the carriages

[1] Juv. *Sat.* iii. 60–65.

of the nobles as they slowly drove up the steep hill of Aricia. Of this promiscuous throng — to say nothing of Asiatics, Gauls, Germans, Spaniards, and Scythians — some were

> 'From farthest south,
> Syene, and where the shadow both way falls,
> Meroe, Nilotic isle; and more to west
> The realm of Bocchus to the Blackmoor sea;
> From India and the Golden Chersonese,
> And utmost Indian isle, Taprobane,
> Dusk faces with white silken turbans wreathed.'

One quarter of the city — that across the Tiber — was largely given up to Jews. They had flocked to Rome in extraordinary numbers after the visit of Pompey to Jerusalem. Sober Roman burghers long remembered with astonishment, and something of alarm, the wild wail which they raised at the funeral of Julius Cæsar, who had always been their generous patron. They were numerous enough, and organised enough, to make it a formidable matter to offend them, though the majority of them — conspicuous everywhere by the basket and hay which they carried to keep their food clean from Gentile profanation — pursued the humblest crafts, and sold sulphur-matches or mended broken pottery, while the lowest of all told fortunes, or begged, or cheated, with cringing mien. The persistence and ability of many of their race had, however, gained them a footing in the houses of the great. Aliturus, the actor, was at this moment a favourite of Nero, and of Rome. The authors of that age — Martial, Juvenal, Persius, Tacitus — abound with wondering and stinging allusions to the votaries of Mosaism.

They made many converts, and the splendid beauty of Berenice and Drusilla, the daughters of Herod Agrippa I., together with the wealth of their brother, Agrippa II., had given them a prominent position in distinguished circles. To their father, the brilliant adventurer Agrippa I., the favourite of Caligula, Claudius had practically owed his elevation to the Empire, since he it was who induced the senators to acquiesce in that uncouth dominion.

The streets of Rome were full of persons who lived in semi-pauperism; lazzaroni who had nothing to depend upon but the *sportula* or dole supplied by noble and wealthy families, or grants of corn made at nominal prices by the

Emperor. They lived anyhow, by their wits and by their vices. In that sunny climate the wants of life are few, and they found abundance of excitement and amusement, while they could hardly be left to starve amid the universal profusion which sometimes squandered millions of sesterces over a single meal.

But few of the dregs of the people presented a more miserable aspect than a Phrygian youth who was loitering aimlessly about the Forum near the hour of noon. The Forum was nearly deserted, for most of the people were taking their siesta, and the youth sat down, looking the picture of wretchedness. He was pale and thin, as though he had gone through many hardships. His tunic was soiled and ragged, and he appeared to be, as he was, a homeless and friendless stranger, alone among the depraved and selfish millions of the world's capital.

While he was thinking what he had best do to allay the pangs of hunger, he saw a young student enter the Forum followed by a little slave. He paid no particular attention to them, but a few moments later his curiosity was aroused, first by hearing the blows of an axe, and then by seeing the student run hastily out of the Forum with the slave-child at his heels. Strolling to the corner from which the sounds had come, he found himself opposite to the lattice-work which projected over the shops of the silversmiths, and seeing an axe lying on the ground, picked it up, and examined it. Alarmed by a rush of feet, he looked up and saw the 'bucket-men' [1] (as the mob nicknamed the police) running up to him. While he was wondering what they could want, he found himself rudely arrested, and saluted with a volley of violent abuse.[2]

'What have I done?' he asked in Greek.

'What have you done, you thievish rascal? You ask that, when we have caught you, axe in hand, hewing at and stealing the lead of the roof?'

The youth, who knew Latin imperfectly, was too much puzzled and confused to understand the objurgations addressed

[1] *Sparteoli*, 'bucket-men,' was the slang term for the police, perhaps from the *spartum*, or rope-basket covered with pitch, in which they carried water as firemen.

[2] Note 19. — Arrest of Onesimus.

to him; but a crowd of idlers rapidly collected, and speaking to one of them, he was answered in Greek that the people of the neighbourhood had long been blamed for stealing the lead from the silversmiths. They had not done it, and were indignant at being falsely accused. And now, as he had been caught in the act, he would be haled off to the court of the City Prætor, and it would be likely to go hard with him. If he got off with thirty lashes he might think himself lucky. More probably he would be condemned to branding, or — since an example was needed — to the cross.

The youth could only cry, and wring his hands, and protest his innocence; but his protests were met by the jeers of the crowd.

'Ah!' said one, 'how will you like to have the three letters branded with a hot iron right across your forehead? That won't make the girls like your face better.'

'Whose slave are you?' asked another. 'Won't you catch it from your master! You'll have to work chained in the slave-jail or at the mill, and may bid good-bye to the sunlight for a year or two at least.'

'Slave?' said another. 'I don't believe he's a slave. He looks too ragged and starved. He's had no regular rations for a long time, I'll be bound.'

'A runaway, I expect,' said a third. 'Well, anyhow he'll have to give an account of himself, unless he likes to have a ride on the little horse,[1] or have his neck wedged tight into a wooden fork.'

'*Furcifer?* Gallows-bird!' cried others of the crowd. 'And we honest citizens are to be accused of stealing because of his tricks!'

'It's a sad pity, too,' said a young woman; 'for look how handsome he is with those dark Asiatic eyes!'

As most of these remarks had been poured out in voluble and slang Latin, the young Phrygian could only make out enough to know that he was in evil case; and, weakened as he was by exposure and insufficient food, he could but feebly plead for mercy, and protest that he had done no wrong.

But the police had not dragged him far when they saw Pudens and Titus approaching them down the Viminal Hill,

[1] *Equuleus* was an instrument of torture.

on which the centurion lived. At the sight of a centurion in the armour of the Prætorians, and a boy who wore a golden bulla, and whom some of them recognised as a son of the brave general Vespasian, the crowd made way. As they passed by, Titus noticed the youth's distress, and, compassionate as usual, begged Pudens to ask what was the matter. The *vigiles* briefly explained how they had seized their prisoner, who must have been guilty of the lead-stealing complained of, for the axe was in his hand, and no one else was near.

'What have you to say for yourself?' asked the centurion.

'I am innocent,' said the prisoner, in Greek; 'the axe is not mine. I only picked it up to look at it. It must have been a young student who was using it, for I saw him run out of the Forum with his slave.'

Pudens and Titus exchanged glances, for they had met the student and slave still hurrying rapidly along. He was the real culprit, but he had heard the silversmiths call for the police, and had taken to his heels. Pudens had seen him stop at the house of a knight a street or two distant, and run up the steps with a speed which a Roman regarded as very undignified.

'Come with me,' he said to the police, 'and I think I can take you to the real offender. This youth is innocent, though things look against him.'

Followed by the crowd, who grumbled a little at losing the enjoyment of watching the trial, Pudens led them to the knight's house. The little slave was amusing himself with hopping to and fro under the vestibule.

'Keep back, Quirites,' said the head *vigil.* 'The centurion and I will ask a question here.'

'Do you know this axe, my small *salaputium*[1]?' said Pudens.

'Yes,' said the child with alacrity, for he was too young to understand the situation. 'It is ours. We dropped it not long ago.'

'The case is clear,' said Pudens. 'I will be witness;' and he offered his ears for the officer to touch.[2] 'Meanwhile you can set this youth free.'

[1] *Salaputium*, 'hop-o'-my-thumb.'

[2] To offer the ears to be touched was a sign of willingness to give witness. See Hor. *Sat.* ix. 77; and for the reason of the custom, Pliny, *N. H.* xi. 103.

The officer touched his ear with the recognised formula. 'Remember, you will be my witness in this case.'

The student was arrested, but his father got him off by a large secret bribe to the police and to the silversmiths. The crowd dispersed, and Pudens and Titus, without waiting to watch the issue of the affair, turned their steps towards the Vicus Apollinis, which led to the Palace.

Soon afterwards they heard footsteps behind them, and, turning round, saw the youth whom they had rescued.

'What more do you want?' said Pudens, in answer to his eager, appealing look. 'I have got you out of your trouble; is not that enough?'

'I am weak, and hungry, and a stranger,' said the youth, humbly.

'He wants money,' whispered Titus, and drawing a denarius from the breast of his toga, he put it into his hand.

But, kneeling down, the stranger seized the hem of the scarlet sagum which Pudens happened to be wearing, and kissing it, exclaimed, 'Oh, sir, take me into your household! I will do anything!'

'Who are you?'

'My name is Onesimus.'

'A good name, and of good omen.[1] *What* are you? You look like a slave. Not a runaway slave, I hope?'

'No sir,' said Onesimus, to whom a lie came as easy as to most of his race. 'I lived at Colossæ. I was kidnapped by a slave-dealer, but I escaped.'

'And you want to go back to Colossæ?'

'No sir. I am left an orphan. I want to earn my living here.'

'Take him,' said Titus. 'You have plenty of room for an extra slave, and I like his looks.'

But Pudens hesitated.

'A Phrygian slave!' he said; 'why even proverbs warn me against him.' He quoted two, *sotto voce*, to Titus — 'Worst of the Mysians,' used of persons despicably bad; and 'More cowardly than a Phrygian hare.'

'Well,' said Titus, 'I will give you proverb for proverb; "Phrygians are improved by scourging."'[2]

[1] Ὀνήσιμος, 'profitable.' St. Paul plays on the meaning of the name in Philemon, 10, 11.

[2] Cic. *Pro Flacco*, 27: 'Phrygium plagis solere fieri meliorem.'

'Yes,' answered Pudens; 'but I am not accustomed to rule my slaves by the whip.'

The boy had not heard them, for they spoke in low tones, but he marked the hesitation of Pudens, and, still crying bitterly, stooped as though to make marks with his finger on the ground. His motion was quick, but Pudens saw that he had drawn in the dust very rapidly a rude outline of a fish, which he had almost instantaneously obliterated with a movement of his palm.

Pudens understood the sign. The youth was, or had been a Christian, and knew that if Pudens happened to be a Christian too his favour would be secured.

'Follow me,' he said. 'My household is small and humble, but I have just lost my lacquey, who died of fever. I will speak to my head freedman. Perhaps, when we have heard something more about you, he will let you fill the vacant place.'

CHAPTER XIII

THE ADVENTURES OF A RUNAWAY

Ἕκαστος δὲ πειράζεται ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας ἐξελκόμενος καὶ δελεαζόμενος. — S. Jac. *Ep.* i. 14.

Φρύγα οἰκέτην ἔχω πονηρόν. — Alciphr. *Ep.* iii. 38.

The real history of Onesimus was this. He had been born at Thyatira; his parents had once been in a respectable position, but his father had been unfortunate, and when the boy became an orphan he had sunk so low in the world that, to save him from the pangs of hunger, the creditors sold him as a slave to the purple-factory of which Lydia — who afterwards became St. Paul's convert at Philippi—was part-owner. There he had learnt a great deal about the purple-trade and the best way of folding and keeping purple robes. But he was wild and careless and fond of pleasure, and the head workman, not finding him profitable or easy to manage, had again offered him for sale. He was a quick, good-looking boy, and Philemon, a gentleman of Colossæ, touched with his forlorn look as he stood on the slave-platform (*catasta*) with his feet chalked and a description (*titulus*) round his neck, had felt compassion for him and had bought him. Not long after this, Philemon, with his wife Apphia, his son Archippus, and several slaves of their household, had been converted by St. Paul. The Apostle had not, indeed, visited the strange Phrygian city, where the Lycus flows under its natural bridges of gleaming travertine; but Philemon and his party had gone down to witness the great Asian games at Ephesus, and to view the treasures of the famous Temple of Artemis, which was one of the wonders of the world. There they had heard Paul preach in the hall of the rhetorician Tyrannus, and, being of sweet and serious disposition, had been profoundly impressed by the message of the gospel. The grace of God had taken possession of their hearts. They exulted in the purity, the hope, and the gladness of Christianity, and under the fostering care of Epaphras, to whose charge St. Paul

had entrusted the churches of the Lycian valley, they had finally been led to the full acceptance of the gospel, and had been baptised in the waters of their native river.

Onesimus had not been baptised with them, though he had learnt something of Christianity as a young catechumen. He had lived in daily contact with these good people from early boyhood, and they had treated him with a kindness and consideration which was in marked contrast to the brutal manner of most Pagans towards the human beings whom they regarded as chattels of which they were the indefeasible owners. But Colossæ was a sleepy and decaying city. It offered none of the pleasures and excitements which Onesimus had tasted at Thyatira and Ephesus. He longed to escape from the narrow valley of the dull town; to hear in the streets of Ephesus the shrill wail of the priests of Cybele; to gaze at the superb Artemisian processions; to sit palpitating with enthusiasm as he watched the chariots dash past him in wild career in the circus, or the gorgeous spectacles of the amphitheatre. Above all he sighed and yearned for Rome, for he had often heard of its glory, its magnificence, its unchecked indulgences. He was only a slave — only one of those Phrygian slaves, who were the least esteemed; but he had been free born. The passions of the Asiatic Greek were strong in him. Other slaves had made their way — why should not he? He was strong, clever, good-looking — was he not certain to secure some fortune in the world?

The 'tempting opportunity' met the 'susceptible disposition.' Philemon was engaged in the wool-dyeing which formed the most prosperous industry of Colossæ, and on a certain day after the great fair of Laodicea considerable sums were paid to him. He had never had any reason to distrust Onesimus, and the youth knew where the money was kept. One day, when Philemon had been summoned by business to Hierapolis and was likely to be absent for a week, Onesimus abstracted some of the gold coins — enough, he thought, to take him safely to Rome if necessary — and absconded to Ephesus. There, for a few days, he enjoyed himself in visiting the marvels and amusements of the city. But a fair youth, in servile dress, alone, in a crowded town, could hardly escape falling among companions of the lowest type. Fain would they have plunged him into vice and dissipation;

but though the runaway was not always truthful, and had fallen into dishonesty, he was far from being depraved. One who had breathed in a pure Christian household the dewy dawn of the Christian faith, and had watched its purple glow transfiguring the commonest elements of life, could hardly sink to the depths of Satan in the great weltering sea of heathen wickedness. Fallen as he was, he never wholly lost his self-respect, and when he had satisfied his first wild impulse he longed to return and plead for forgiveness. After all, how infinitely more happy had he been in sleepy Colossæ than in tumultuous Ephesus! But for a slave to abscond from a kind master, and in absconding to steal his master's gold, was not only a heinous but a capital offence. He did not know but what Philemon, good and kind as he was, might still deem it right to uphold the laws of the State, and to hand him over to the magistrates. And then he shuddered to think of what awaited him: what blows, what brandings, what wearing of the furca, or thrusting into the stocks, or being made to work in the mines or the galleys, or among the chained wretches of some public slave-prison. The soft nature of the Eastern shrank from such horrors, and almost more from the intolerable sense of shame which would overwhelm him when he stood for the first time a convict-fugitive in his master's house.

His ill-got money was soon ill-gone. A little of it was lost in gambling; some he had to squander on worthless companions, who tried to insinuate themselves into his favour, or to terrify him with their suspicions; the rest was stolen one night in the low lodging which he had been obliged to seek. Penniless, and sick at heart, he hurried down to the great quay of the city, and offered to work his passage to Italy in a galley. Landed in Italy he had begged his way to Rome, and in Rome he had sunk to the wretchedness in which we first saw him. No career seemed open to him but a career of vice; no possibility offered of earning his daily bread but by criminal courses. He sank back horrified from the rascality which he had witnessed on every side, among those who, being past feeling, and having their consciences seared as with a hot iron, wrought all uncleanness with greediness. He grew more and more emaciated, more and more wretched, sleeping under arches or porticoes, and depending for his scant supply of

polenta on the chance of a farthing flung to him now and then in scornful alms. The accident which threw him in the path of Pudens came only just in time to save him from ruin and despair.

Nereus, the freedman of Pudens, was not unwilling to get for nothing an active youth who might turn out to be a useful slave; and in that household he once more found kindness and happiness. It is true that Pudens was not yet an open Christian, but several of his slaves were, as Onesimus soon discovered; and he had learnt by experience that, among Christian men and women, he was safe from a thousand miseries and a thousand temptations. The busy thronging, rushing life of Rome delighted his quick intelligence, and all the more from the contrast it presented to the silent streets of Colossæ, and the narrow valley of its strange white stream.

He had several adventures, and such principles of righteousness as were left to him were severely tried. Some of the young slaves whom he encountered took him to the theatres, and in the pantomimic displays and Atellan fables a cynical shamelessness reigned supreme. To witness the acting of a Paris or an Aliturus was to witness consummate human skill and beauty pandering to the lowest instincts of humanity. Yet Onesimus could not keep away from these scenes, though Stachys and Nereus and Junia and others of the Christian slaves of Pudens did their best, when the chance offered, to save him from the vortex of such perilous dissipation.

Still more brutalising, still more destructive of every element of pureness and kindness were the gladiatorial games. Of these he had no experience. In the provinces they were comparatively rare, and Philemon had forbidden his slaves ever to be present in the amphitheatre when they were exhibited. Onesimus, who had nothing cruel in his nature, had so far preserved a sort of respect for the wishes of Philemon, that he determined not to witness a gladiatorial show. When the great day came, all the slaves were talking of the prowess of Gallina and Syrus, two famous gladiators, and of the magnificent number of lions and tigers which were to be exhibited.

He could not help being interested in a topic which seemed so absorbing, but he still meant to keep away. Some of his comrades, however, thought that scruples which might suit a Cicero and a Seneca were quite out of place in a Phrygian

foot-boy, and seized him in the street and said, 'We are going to take you to the amphitheatre by force.'

'It is of no use to take me,' said Onesimus, repeating a sentiment which he had heard from Philemon. 'I am not going to see fine fellows — fine Dacians and Britons — hack one another to pieces to please a multitude of whom the majority deserve life much less than the gladiators themselves.'

'*Di magni, salaputium disertum!*' exclaimed Lygdus, one of the gay and festal company who belonged to Cæsar's household. 'I heard Epictetus say something of the kind, and we all know that the poor little fellow is only a small echo of Musonius. But you, Onesimus, cannot pretend to be a philosopher, and instead of talking seditious nonsense against the majesty of the Roman people, go you shall.'

'Well then, you will have to drag me there by force,' said Onesimus.

'Never mind; go you shall,' said Lygdus; and, seizing him by the neck and arms, they hurried him along with them into the top seats set apart for slaves and the proletariat.

When once there, Onesimus had not the wisdom to behave as young Alypius did three centuries later, and to close his eyes. On the contrary, he caught fire, almost from the first moment, with the wild excitement, and returned home paganised in every fibre of his being by the horrid voluptuous maddening scene which he had witnessed — in which he had taken part. All that was sweet and pure and tender in the lessons which he had learnt in the house of Philemon seemed to have been swept away for the time in that crimson tide of blood, in that demoniac spectacle of strong men sacrificed as on a Moloch-altar for the amusement of the idle populace. The more splendid the agility of the nets-man, the more brawny the muscles of the Samnite, the more dazzling the sweep of the mirmillo's steel, the more vivid was the excitement of watching the glazing eye and ebbing life. It was thrilling to see the supreme moments and most unfathomed mysteries of existence turned into the spectacle of a holiday; and even to help in deciding by the movement of a thumb whether some blue-eyed German from the Teutobergian forests should live or die. What wonder was it that waves of emotion swept over the assembled multitude as the gusts

of a summer tempest sweep over the waving corn? What wonder that the hearts of thousands, as though they were the heart of one man, throbbed together in fierce sympathy, and became like a wild Æolian harp, of which the strings were beaten into murmurs or shrieks or sobs by some intermittent hurricane? In the concentrated passion of those hours, when every pulse leapt and tingled with excitement, the youth seemed to live through years in moments; his whole being palpitated with a delicious horror, which annihilated all the ordinary interests of life. Here, for the mere dissipation of time, the most consummate tragedies were enacted as part of a scenic display. The spasms of anguish and the heroism of endurance were but the passing incidents of a gymnastic show.

When Onesimus returned to his cell that night he was a changed being. For a long time he could not sleep, and when he did sleep the tumult of the arena still rolled through his troubled dreams. His fellow-slaves, long familiar with such games, were amused to hear him start up from his pallet with shouts of *Habet! Occide! Verbera!* and all the wild cries of the amphitheatre, and from these bloodshot dreams he would awake panting as from a nightmare, while the chant of the gladiators, *Ave, Cæsar! Morituri te salutamus*, still woke its solemn echoes in his ears.

All life looked stale and dull to the Phrygian slave when the glow of an Italian morning entering his cell aroused him to the duties of the day. Slaves, even in a humble home like that of Pudens, were so numerous as to make those duties inconceivably light. For the greater part of the day his time was his own, for all he had to do was to wait on Pudens when he went out, carrying anything which his master might require. But henceforth his thoughts were day-dreams, and, when not engaged in work, he found nothing to do but to join in the gossip of his fellow-slaves. Their talk turned usually on three subjects — their masters, and all the low society slanders of the city; the delights of the taverns; the merits of rival gladiators and charioteers, whose names were on every lip. Such conversation led of course to incessant betting, and many a slave lost the whole amount of his savings again and again by backing the merits of a Pacideianus or a Spicillus; or by running up too long scores at the cook-shop (*popina*) to which his fellow-slaves resorted; or by trying to win the

affections of some favourite female flute-player from Syria or Spain.

Gambling, too, was the incessant diversion of these idle hordes. The *familia* of Pudens only consisted of the modest number of thirty, but the slave population of Rome was of colossal magnitude, and there was a terrible free-masonry among the members of this wretched and corrupted class. The companions of Onesimus were not chiefly to be found in the household to which he belonged, but among the lewd idlers whom he picked up as acquaintances in every street. With these he played at dice, and sauntered about, and jested, and drank, and squabbled, and betted, until he was on the high road towards being as low a specimen of the slave-world as any of them all — a beautiful human soul caught in the snare of the devil, lured by the glittering bait of vice, to be dragged forth soon to die lacerated and gasping upon the shore.

Hitherto a very little had sufficed him, but now he began to need money — money for gambling, money for the taverns, money to spend in the same sins and follies in which the slaves about him spent their days. He could indeed have gained it, had he sunk so low, in a thousand nefarious ways; and, gifted as he was with a quick and supple intelligence, as well as with no small share of the beauty of his race, he might have run away once more, or have secured his purchase into many a pagan household, where he might have become the pampered favourite of some luxurious master. Such, in such a city as Rome, would have been the certain fate of any youth like him, had it not been for the truths which he had heard from Epaphras in the house of Philemon. When he was most willing to forget those holy lessons they still hung about him and gave him checks. The grace of God still lived as a faint spark, not wholly quenched, under the whitening embers of his life. He could not forget that what were now his pleasures had once been pains, and sometimes amid the stifling atmosphere of a dissipation which rapidly tended to become pleasureless, his soul seemed to 'gasp among the shallows,' sore athirst for purer air.

But he resisted these retarding influences, and by fiercer draughts of excitement strove to dispel the pleadings of the still small voice.

It was not long before he felt hard pressed, for he had gambled away the little he had earned.

He had stolen before — he would steal again.

The slaves of Pudens were mostly of a simpler and more faithful class than those of the more luxurious houses. There was no need for Pudens to take great precautions about the safety of his money. Most of it was safe in the hands of his banker (*mensarius*), but sums which to a slave would seem considerable were locked up in a chest under the charge of Nereus. Nereus, as we have already mentioned, was a Christian, and Onesimus, until he had begun to degenerate, had felt warmly drawn towards his daughter Junia. He thought, too, that the simple maiden was not wholly indifferent to him. But Nereus had watched his career, and as it became too probable that the Phrygian would sink into worthlessness, he had taken care that Onesimus and his daughter should scarcely ever meet.

But when, as in every Roman house, a multitude live in a confined space, the whole ways of the house become known to all, and Onesimus knew the place where Nereus kept the ready money of his master. He watched his opportunity when all but a few members of the household were absent to witness a festival, from which he had purposely absented himself on a plea of sickness. The only persons left at home were Nereus and others who, being Christians, avoided giving the smallest sanction to pagan ceremonies. The house was still as the grave in the noontide, when the youth glided into the cell of the sleeping Nereus, and deftly abstracted from his tunic the key which he wanted. Armed with this, he slipped into the *tablinum*, or private room, of Pudens — whom he knew to be on duty at the Palace — and had already opened the casket in which he kept his money, when he was startled by a low voice and a gliding footstep.

He had not been unobserved. Nereus was too faithful, and too much aware of the dishonesty of the unhappy class to which he belonged, to leave his master's interests unprotected. He had directed his daughter always to be watchful at the hour when he knew that a theft was most feasible. Junia, from the apartments of the female slaves, on the other side of the house, had heard some one moving stealthily along the passage. Hidden behind a statue, she had observed a

slave stealing into her father's cell, had followed lightly, and with a pang of shame had seen the youth of whom she had thought as a lover make his way noiselessly to the room of his master.

She followed him to the entrance; she saw him open the casket; and she grew almost sick with terror when she thought of the frightful punishment — possibly even crucifixion itself — which might follow the crime he was on the eve of committing. She would fain have stopped him, but did not dare to enter the chamber; and, meanwhile, for some reason the youth was lingering.

He was lingering because there rang in his ear a voiceless memory of words which Epaphras had quoted as a message of Paul of Tarsus. The still voice said to him: 'Let him that stole steal no more; but rather let him labour, working with his hands.'

He was trying to suppress the mutiny of 'the blushing shamefast spirit' within him, as he thought of the games and the dice-box and the Subura, when he was thrilled through and through by a terrified and scarcely audible whisper of his name —

'Onesimus!'

He turned round, and with nervous haste relocking the casket, hurried into the passage. There, with head bowed over her hands, he saw the figure of a young girl. For one instant she raised her face as he came out, and he exclaimed — 'Junia!'

She raised her hand with a warning gesture, put her finger to her lips, and vanished. She fled towards the garden behind the farthest precincts of the house, and he overtook her in a walk sheltered from view by a trellis covered with the leaves of a spreading vine.

'Junia,' he said, flinging himself on his knees, 'will you betray me?'

The girl stood pale and trembling. 'Onesimus,' she said, 'I conceal nothing from my father.'

'From your father? Oh, Junia, he would drag me before Pudens. Would you see me beaten, perhaps to death, with the leaded thongs? Would you hear me shriek under the horrible *scutica?* Could you bear to see the crows tearing my flesh as I hung on the cross?'

'Pudens is just and kind,' she said, faintly; 'he never inflicts upon his slaves such horrors as these.'

'No,' answered Onesimus, bitterly; 'it would suffice to send me, chained, to work in some sunless pit to the music of clanking fetters. It would suffice to brand three letters on my forehead, and turn me into the world to starve as a spectacle of shame.'

'Onesimus,' she said, 'would God I could —' She stopped, confused and terrified, for she did not know that Onesimus had ever heard the truths of Christianity.

'Junia,' he exclaimed, 'you are a Christian; so am I' — and he marked on the gravel the monogram of Christ.

'Alas!' she answered, 'a Christian you cannot be. It seems that you have heard of Jesus; but Christians cannot steal, and cannot live as you have been living. Christians are innocent.'

'Then you will betray me? Ah! but if you do, you are in my power. Christianity is a foreign superstition. The City Prætor —'

'Base,' she answered, 'and baser than I thought. Know you not' — and a light came into her eye, and a glow over all her face — 'that a Christian can suffer? that even a Christian slave-girl does not fear at all to die?'

He thought that she had never looked so beautiful — so like one of the angels of whom he had heard in the gatherings at Colossæ. But the sight of the gladiators hacking each other to pieces had inured him to cruelty and blood — had filled him with fierce egotism, and indifference to human life. A horrible thought suddenly leapt upon him as with a tiger's leap. Why not get rid of the sole witness of his crime?

'Then you will betray me to chains, to branding, to the scourge, to the cross?' he asked, fiercely.

Weeping, hiding her face in her hands, she said: 'What duty tells me, I must do. I must tell my father.'

In an instant the devil had Onesimus in his grip. He thrust his right hand into his bosom, where he had purposely concealed a dagger.

'Then die!' he exclaimed, seizing her with his left hand, while the steel gleamed in the sun.

The girl moved not; but his own shriek startled the air, as he felt a hand come down on his shoulder with the grasp of a

vice. The dagger was wrenched out of his hand; he was whirled round, the blow of a powerful fist stretched him on the path, and a foot which seemed as if it would crush out his life was placed upon his breast.

'Oh, father, spare him!' said Junia.

Nereus still kept his foot on the prostrate youth, still held the dagger in his hand; his eyes still flashed, his whole frame was dilated with righteous indignation. He had misunderstood the meaning of the scene.

'Explain!' he said. 'Junia! You here alone with Onesimus in the vine-walk, at the lonely noon! How did he inveigle you here? Did he dare to insult you?'

The girl had risen; and while Onesimus lay on the ground, stunned with the violence of his fall, she told her father all that had happened.

Nereus spurned the youth with his foot.

'And I once thought,' he said, 'that he was a secret Christian! I once thought that some day he might be worthy to be the husband of my Junia! A thief! a would-be murderer! This comes of harbouring a strange Phrygian in an honest household.'

'Father, forgive him!' said Junia. 'Are not we forgiven?'

'The wrong to me — the threat against the life of the child I love — yes, that might be forgiven,' said Nereus; 'forgiven if repented of. But how can I do otherwise than tell Pudens? How can I keep this youth a member of the household?'

And again, moved by strong passion, he spurned him with his foot.

'Is there one house in Rome, father,' she said, 'in which there are not thieves? in which there are not men — aye, and women too — who steal, and would murder if they could? Is he worse than thousands whom yet we do not see chained in the prisons or rotting on the crosses? And have we not all sinned? and did not Jesus say, "Forgive one another your trespasses"?'

A half-suppressed groan from Onesimus stopped the conversation.

'I know not what to do,' said Nereus. 'Go back, my child, to your cell and to your distaff. I will see you soon. And you,' he said, 'thrice-wretched boy, come with me.'

He dragged Onesimus from the ground, and was in such a

transport of wrath that he could not refrain from shaking him by the shoulders with the roughest and most contemptuous violence, before he thrust him into the house, and into the cell which had been assigned to him. Then, calling two of his fellow-slaves, Stachys and Amplias, Christians like himself, whom he could implicitly trust, he bade them bind Onesimus hand and foot, and leave him, not unwatched, till he should have time to consider his case.

CHAPTER XIV

MOTHER AND SON

'Asper et immitis, breviter vis omnia dicam?
Dispeream si te mater amare potest.'

SUETON. *Tib.* 59.

NERO was now firmly seated on the throne of the Empire. Its cares sat lightly on him. The government went on admirably without him. He had nothing to do but to glut himself with enjoyments, and to make what he could of the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them.

At first, like one dazed with a sudden outburst of light, he had been unable to understand the immensity of his own power. For the first month of his reign he could hardly realise that he was more than a boy. He had always been passionately fond of chariot races, which as a boy he had not been permitted to frequent. One day, while at his lessons, he had been deploring to his companions the fate of a charioteer of the green faction who had been thrown out of his chariot and dragged to death by his own horses. His master, overhearing the conversation, reproved him, and the boy, with a clever and ready lie, said, 'I was only talking about Hector being dragged round the walls of Troy by Achilles.' And now he might watch the races all day long and plunge into the hottest rivalry of the factions, and neither in this pursuit nor in any other was there a single human being to say him nay.

The only thing which troubled him was the jealous interference of his mother. Agrippina still clutched with desperate tenacity at the vanishing fruits of the ambition for the sake of which all her crimes had been committed. She had sold her soul, and was beating back the conviction that she had sold it for nought. How could that slight boy of seventeen, whom as a child she had so often chastised with her own hand, dream of resisting her? Was not her nature, compared with

his, as adamant to clay? She had been a princess of the blood from infancy, surrounded by near relatives who had been adored in life and deified after death; she had enjoyed power during two reigns, and now at last she had fancied that she would control the Empire for the remainder of her life. Was not her skill in intrigue as great as that of Livia? Was not her indomitable purpose even more intense? She forgot that Livia had been, what Caligula called her, *Ulysses stolatus*, 'a Ulysses in petticoats,' a woman with absolute control over her own emotions. Agrippina, on the other hand, was full of a wild passion which ruined her caution and precipitated her end.

And she forgot, more fatally, the total collapse of all Livia's soaring ambitions. Livia had procured the death of prince after prince who stood between her son Tiberius and the throne. Tiberius did indeed become Emperor, but 'had Zimri peace who slew his master'? Pliny calls Tiberius 'confessedly the gloomiest of men.' He himself wrote to the Senate that he felt himself daily destroyed by all the gods and goddesses. And, after all, his only son died, and he was succeeded by Caligula, the bad and brutal son of the hated and murdered Germanicus and the hated and murdered Agrippina the elder. He might have said with the blood-stained usurper of our great tragedy:—

> 'Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
> And put a barren sceptre in my gripe;
> Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding.'

Was it likely to be otherwise with her son Nero?

Nero — slight boy as she thought him — had hardly been seated on the throne when he began to slip out of her control. Pallas, her secret lover, her chief supporter, was speedily ejected and disgraced. Seneca and Burrus were both opposed to her influence, and neither of them dreaded her vengeance. Suitors for favours were more anxious to secure the intercession of Acte than hers. Nero, surrounded by dissolute young aristocrats, and also by adventurers, buffoons and parasites, was daily showing himself more indifferent to her threats, her commands, even her reasonable wishes. He liked to parade his new-born freedom. She felt sure that among

the circle of his familiar companions, she and her pretensions were turned into ridicule. Her proud cheek flushed even in solitude to think that she, who, for Nero's sake, had dared all, should have been superseded in her influence by such curled and jewelled weaklings as Otho, and ousted from her son's affections by a meek freedwoman like Acte. How terribly had she miscalculated! In the reign of Claudius she had been the mightiest person in the Court and in the State. Had she become the murderess of her husband only to transfer from herself into the hands of men whom she despised too much to hate, the power which was once her own? Had she flung away the substance and only grasped a flickering shadow?

A thousand plans of revenge crossed her mind, only to be rejected. The die was cast. The deeds done were irrevocable. It only remained for her to dree the judgment for her crimes, and to take such few steps as still were possible to her along the precipice's edge. She had plucked a tempting fruit, and she found that its taste was poison; she had nursed a serpent in her bosom, and its sting was death.

But she would not resign her power without at least one mad struggle to retain it. She still had access to the Emperor whenever she desired, and many a wild scene had occurred between the mother and the son. In such interviews she let her tongue run riot. She refrained from nothing. She no longer attempted to conceal from him that Claudius had died by her hand. She wrapped the youth round in the whirlwind of her sulphurous passion; she raised her voice so loud in a storm of reproaches and recriminations that sometimes even the freedmen and soldiers outside the imperial apartments heard the fierce voices of altercation, and were in doubt whether they should not rush in and interfere. And often the feeble nature of Nero cowered before her menaces as she poured on him a flood of undisguised contempt. Sometimes she wrapped him in a storm of satire and sarcasm. She upbraided him with his unmanliness; she contrasted him unfavourably with Britannicus; she told him that he was more fit to be an actor of melodrama, or a tenth-rate charioteer, or a fiftieth-rate singer, than to be the Emperor of Rome.

'To think,' she said, raising her voice almost to a scream, as he sat before her in sullen silence — 'to think that the

blood of the Domitii and of the Neros and of the Cæsars is in your veins! You an emperor! Yes; an emperor of pantomime! You have nothing of the Roman, much less of the ruler, nay, not even of the man, in you. Who made you Emperor? Who but I?'

'I wish you had left me alone, then,' he answered, desperately. 'It is no such pleasure to be Emperor with you to spy on me and domineer over me.'

'Spy on you? Domineer over you? Ungrateful! Infamous! You, who have made a slave-girl the rival of your mother! Let me tell you, Ahenobarbus, that I at least am the daughter of Germanicus, though you are wholly unworthy to be his grandson. Whence did you get your pale and feeble blood? Not from me, coward and weakling as you are; not from your father Domitius, who, if he was cruel, was at least a man! He would not have chosen such creatures as Otho and Senecio for his friends. He had a man's taste and a man's ambition. He would have blushed to be father of a singing and painting girl like you! But beware! You are an *agrippa;* you were born feet-foremost — a certain augury of future misery.'[1]

Stung to the quick by these reproaches, trembling with impotent wrath to hear his effeminate vanity — to which his comrades burnt daily incense — thus ruthlessly insulted, and angry, above all, that his mother dared to pour contempt on his cherished accomplishments, Nero's timid nature at last turned in self-defence.

'I am Emperor now, at any rate,' he said; 'and ere now the wives and sisters, if not the mothers, of the Cæsars have had to cool their rage on the rocks of Gyara or Pontia!'

'You dare to threaten me?' she cried. '*You* to threaten *me;* me, your mother; me, who have toiled and schemed, aye, and committed crimes for you, from a child; me, whose womb bare you, whose hand has often beaten you; me, to whom you owe it that you are not at this moment a disgraced and penniless boy!'

'You call me an actor. Are not you more than half an actress?' he said, in a sneering tone.

Agrippina sprang from her seat in a burst of passion.

'Oh, if there be gods!' she exclaimed, uplifting her hands,

[1] Note 20. — Agrippas.

'let them hear me! Infernal Furies at least there are, for I have felt them! Oh! may they avenge on you my wrongs!'

Nero cared but little for the curse. He was not superstitious. He thought how Senecio and Petronius would laugh at the notion of there being real Furies or subterranean gods!

'You know more of the Furies than I do, then,' he said, in a mocking tone. 'Besides, I have an amulet. Look at this!'

He handed to her the *icuncula puellaris* — the wooden doll which had been given him in the streets, with the mysterious promise that it would prove to be a charm against every malignant influence. He honoured it as Louis XI. did the little leaden saint which he wore in his hat when he had ceased to honour anything else. She glanced at it with utter scorn; then, to his horror, flung it on the ground and spurned it away.

'And you are Pontifex Maximus!' she said, concentrating into the words a world of unmitigated scorn.

Nero was silent, but his look was so dark that, fearing lest she should have gone too far, she said in calmer tones, 'You have a better amulet than that paltry image, and one which your mother gave you. But your follies render it unavailing.'

She pointed to a golden armlet, in which was set the skin of a serpent, which he wore on his right arm. The serpent had been found gliding in his room near his cradle; or, perhaps, according to another story, its cast-off skin had been found beside his pillow. Many legends had sprung up about it. The populace believed that it was a sacred spirit which had protected him, and had driven from his infant cradle the murderers sent by Messalina to destroy him. But, while Nero was yet a child, Agrippina had had the skin of the serpent curiously set in a jewelled armlet of great value, with rubies for its eyes, and emeralds marking the traces of its scales, and had clasped it on Nero's arm, and bidden him to wear it forever. And as his life advanced in golden prosperity she had come to believe, or to half believe, that there was some mysterious charm about it — for a mind may be atheistical and yet profoundly superstitious.

But as she gazed at it with a sort of fascination, she was seized by one of the violent reactions of feeling which often sweeps over a mind untrained in the control of its passions. It brought before her the image of a little boy, whose sweet

and sunny face looked the picture of engaging innocence; whose golden hair, when it caught the sunlight, shone like an aureole round his head; whose blue eyes danced with childish glee at the sight of what was beautiful; to whom his mother was all in all; who had often flung his arms round her neck, in joy and in sorrow, with the fondness of a loving child. That child stood before her — through her crimes Emperor of Rome. He stood there, hateful and hating her — on his lips the flickering smile of mockery; on his once bright forehead the scowl of anger. Yet whom had she in all the world besides? Her father had been murdered; her mother murdered; three of her brothers murdered; her sisters were dead, and had died in shame; her first husband dead; two others of her husbands poisoned — and by her; her lovers dead, or banished far away. She knew that a chaos of hatred yawned wide and deep around her; she knew that in all the wide world no single person, except possibly one or two of her freedmen, cared for her. In her agony, in her loneliness, she had tried of late to win something like forgiveness, something like tolerance, if not affection, from the deeply injured Britannicus and Octavia. She pitied the sorrows and wrongs which she had herself inflicted on them. She had even learnt to admire some gracious quality in them both, for which she could find no name. But, alas! she soon found that, while they were perfect in courtesy, they could never love her. The life, the affection of her son was the sole thing left her; and he was turning against her with a feeling akin to loathing stamped upon his face.

All these thoughts rushed over her mind like a tornado. Unable to bear them, she ended the interview by a passion of uncontrollable weeping. And, as she wept, she held out her appealing arms to her son, and wailed:

'Oh, Nero, forgive my wild words. Whom have we but one another? In this drowning sea must we not sink or rise together? My son! my son! your mother pleads with you. Forgive me — kiss me; let Agrippina feel once more that she has the love of the son for whose sole sake she has lived — for whom she would gladly die!'

A noble nature would have been moved by the tragic appeal of so proud a mother; but the nature of Nero, essentially mean, had become constantly meaner. He trembled before

those who confronted him with boldness; but he triumphed over all who showed that they feared him. He wanted to feel perfectly independent. The only person whose power he feared was his mother. And here was this all-dreaded mother pleading with him, at whose lightest look he had been accustomed for years to tremble! He was not in the least moved; he only intended to secure the ascendency of which, in that struggle, he had won the first step.

'You curse me,' he said, 'one moment, and the next you are all tears and entreaties. Do you think that it is only *your* amulet that keeps me from your Furies? You have dishonoured my image; see how much I care for your amulet. I will never wear it again.'

He unclasped the armlet from his wrist, and flung it to the other end of the room.

'There!' he said. '*You* may have it; I have done with it!' And with these words he turned his back upon her, and went out without a farewell.

It seemed a small matter, and what else could she expect from such a being as her son — a youth soft without tenderness, caressing without affection, cruel without courage?

She stood and looked towards the curtain through which he had disappeared. She stood with gleaming eyes and dilated nostrils, and firm-set lips. Every tear was dried up in her burning glance, as she outstretched her clenched hand and vowed a terrible vengeance.

'O wronged Britannicus!' she murmured; 'O wronged Octavia! cannot I even now redress your wrongs? Alas! it cannot be. Their first act would be to avenge the injured manes of Claudius. But does not Rubellius Plautus live, and Cornelius Sulla? Could I not even yet brush this mean and thankless actor like an insect from my path — son though he be — and seat one of them upon the throne of the Cæsars?'

She picked up the armlet with the serpent's skin. 'It shall be as he said,' she murmured; 'he shall never wear or see it more.'

When his hour of doom had come, Nero searched for that amulet in vain!

CHAPTER XV

EMPEROR AND ÆSTHETE.

'The skipping king, he ambled up and down
With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits,
Soon kindled and soon burned : carded his state,
Mingled his royalty with capering fools,
Had his great name profaned with their scorns.'

1. *Henry IV.* iii. 2.

Nero tried to persuade himself that he cared little for such scenes as that which we have witnessed; but in reality they troubled him. It required a strong effort to shake off their effects, and they left his small pleasure-loving nature in a state of tremor and disgust. He longed to escape from them to some complete retirement, where, away from all pomp, he could give himself up, heart and soul, to selfish æstheticism and voluptuous delight.

He had villas at Antium and at Baiæ, but even they were more public than he desired, and he determined to escape from the noise and heat and worry of Rome to an enchanting lodge which had been designed by the architects, Severus and Celer, in one of the wildest gorges of the Simbruine ridge of the Apennines, a little above the modern town of Subiaco. Through this gorge the icy stream of the Anio forces its way, leaping down into the valley beneath in tumultuous cataracts. By damming the river the architects had with consummate taste and skill, caused it to spread into three mountain lakes, three hundred feet above the valley. On either side of the gorge they had built a hunting-lodge half hidden amid the dense foliage, and the two villas — for such they practically were — had been united by a bridge which spanned the abyss with a graceful arch at a stupendous height above the valley. Nature and art combined to make the scene supremely beautiful. The grounds and gardens of the villas spread down to the smiling vale beneath, by walks under overhanging rocks, tapestried

with the luxuriant growth of creepers and wild flowers. Underfoot the moss of softest emerald was now variegated with the red autumnal leaves. Where the pure runnels trickled down little gullies of the rocks they were brightened with maidenhair and arborescent ferns. The artificial sheets of water, in which many water-fowl swam undisturbed, were overshadowed by beeches and oaks and golden platanes which late autumn had touched with her fiery finger.

It was an enchanting spot. Gay shallops were always ready on the artificial lakes if any guest cared to row or to plunge in the cool bright water. On the smooth lawn the 'gemmy peacocks,' as the Latin poets called them, strutted and displayed their Indian glories, mingled with tame pheasants and partridges. Kids leaped and sported about the rocky slopes. The cushat-doves cooed from the groves, and white pigeons from the dove-cotes would come crowding round for maize-grain at the slightest call. The Rhodian hens clucked contentedly about the farmyard, which was crowded also with geese and guinea-fowls. The long-haired young town-slaves, full of frolic, worked in the garden in mock obedience to the orders of the country bailiff; but the gardener did not attach much importance to their labours, for they were far more intent on pilfering the best fruit they could find in the granaries than on cultivating the soil; and the rustics knew that to offend them was as much as their place was worth.

The lodges themselves made no pretence to the Cæsarean magnificence of the Palace at Rome. But their simplicity did not exclude the exercise of luxurious taste in their construction and adornment. All the rooms were brightened with lovely frescoes painted by the most famous rhyparographists. On the walls of the richer apartments there were orbs of porphyry and lapis lazuli. The impluvium, into which fell the ceaseless plash of a musical fountain, was a basin of Thasian stone, once a rarity even in temples, and the stop which regulated the play of the water was formed into the winged figure of a child moulded in silver. In the centre of the hall, which was tessellated with small pieces of blue and white marble, there was an exquisite copy of the doves of Scopas. Statues by such masters as Myron and Praxiteles stood between the pillars of the peristyle. The windows were filled with glass, and between them were abaci of peacock-

marble, supported on the gilded wings of Cupids, and of griffins which looked in opposite directions. On these slabs of marble stood some of the gold and silver plate which Augustus had ordered to be made out of the statuettes of precious metals which had been erected to him by too-adulatory provincials. On other tables of ivory and fragrant woods lay engraved gems and cameos, or curiosities, brought from all lands. The walls of the small but precious library were covered, in imitation of the famous library of Apollo, with medallions of the most famous Greek and Roman authors in repoussé work of gold and silver, or moulded of Corinthian bronze. Poets, historians, jurists, orators were grouped together, and between the groups were framed specimens of the most exquisite palæography.

Nero was going for the first time to take possession of this enchanting retreat, the loveliness of which had kindled the surprise and admiration of the few who had seen it. He started from Rome with a splendid retinue. He himself rode in a light car, inlaid with ivory and silver, and was followed by an army of a thousand slaves and retainers. One of the earliest lessons which he learnt was that his resources were practically boundless, so that from the first he broke out into unheard-of extravagance. His mules were shod with silver. The muleteers were dressed in liveries of Canusian wool, dyed scarlet. The runners in front of his chariot, and the swarthy cohort of outriders from Mazaca in Numidia, selected for their skill in horsemanship, were adorned with bracelets and trappings of gold. The more delicate slaves had their faces covered with masks, or tinged with cosmetics, lest their complexions should suffer from the sunlight. Many of the slaves had no other office than to carry, with due care, the lyres and other musical instruments which were required for the theatrical entertainments.

Agrippina, devoured with chagrin and resentment, had indeed been asked to accompany him, but in a way so insultingly ungracious, that she declined. She dreaded to share with him a place so retired, in which she knew that almost every hour would fill her with disgust and anger. She had chosen instead to go alone to her stately villa at Bauli, on the Campanian shore. There, if she had little else to occupy her time, she could continue her own memoirs, or amuse herself with the lampreys and mullets, which were so tame that

they would come at her call, and feed out of her hand. Her husband's mother, Antonia, had attached earrings to one pet lamprey, so that people used to visit the villa to see it. Agrippina followed her example.

Octavia followed Nero. She had not been suffered to possess any villa which she could call her own, and much as Nero would have liked to leave her behind, he was compelled by public opinion to observe a certain conventional respect for his Empress, the daughter of Claudius. The sedan in which she travelled was carried by eight stalwart Bithynian porters, but she was not honoured with any splendour or observance, and had only a modest retinue out of her six hundred nominal attendants. Still humbler was the following of Britannicus. He had been bidden to come partly because it would have seemed shameful to leave him alone in Rome during an unhealthy season, when even persons of low position were driven into the country by the month in which Libitina claimed her most numerous victims; and also because Nero was glad to keep him in sight. He was happy enough, for Titus was with him, and Pudens was one of the escort; and as Epaphroditus necessarily attended his master, Nero, it was not difficult to get leave for Epictetus to come in his train. The two kind-hearted boys thought that the pale face of the slave-child might gain a touch of rose from the fresh winds of the Apennines.

Very few ladies were invited. It was necessary, indeed, that one or two should accompany Octavia; and Nero, for his own reasons, wished Junia Silana and Calvia Crispinilla to be of the party. These were ladies with whom a young matron like Octavia could scarcely exchange a word, but happily for her, Flavia Domitilla, the wife of Vespasian, was asked to accompany the Empress. Vespasian, who had just returned from his proconsulate, had been summoned to have an interview with Nero on the state of affairs in Africa, and to stay for some days. Acte was in the train of Nero, but, though she rarely saw Octavia, the unfortunate Empress little knew that the presence of Domitilla, the only lady to whom she could speak without a shudder, was really due to the private suggestion of the lovely and kind-hearted freedwoman. Flavia Domitilla was of the humblest origin, and her father had occupied no higher office than

that of a quæstor's clerk. That no nobler companion had been sought for her would have been regarded as an insult by any lady of haughty character; but Octavia preferred the society of the honest matron to that of a thousand Crispinillas.

Seneca and Burrus were invited for a brief visit only, and as Nero liked to give a flavour of intellectuality to the society which he gathered round him, Lucan was asked, as the rising poet of the day; and Silius Italicus, as a sort of established poet laureate; and Persius, the young Etrurian knight, who, though but twenty-one years old, was so warmly eulogised by his tutor, Cornutus, that great things were expected of him. None of his satires had yet seen the light, but his head would hardly have been safe if Nero could have read some of the lines locked up in his writing-desk. With these had been also invited C. Plinius Secundus, a wealthy knight, thirty-four years of age, in whose encyclopædic range of knowledge it was hoped that the guests might find an endless fund of amusement and anecdote in their more serious moments.

But while Nero liked to keep up the credit of dabbling in literary pursuits, the choice spirits to whom he looked for his real delight were very different from these graver personages. The fashionable elegance of Otho and the luxurious cynicism of Petronius were indispensable for his amusement. Tigellinus was too intimate to be excluded; and with these came Vatinius, the witty buffoon and cobbler of Beneventum, an informer of the lowest class. This cobbler's chief recommendations were personal deformity, an outrageous tongue, and an abnormally prominent nose. He avenged himself on society for the wrongs inflicted on him by nature. He rejoiced in the immortality of having given his name to a drinking-cup with a long nozzle, which has preserved his memory in the verse of Juvenal and Martial.

Here Nero enjoyed life to his heart's content. The happy accident that the villa really consisted of two edifices, separated by the bridge across the glen, enabled him to keep his least welcome guests in the Villa Castor, and his chosen companions in the Villa Pollux.

In the grounds of the Villa Castor, Seneca and Burrus had rooms in which they could transact with their secretaries their

ministerial and military business. Pliny could bury himself among the rarer treasures of the library, or amuse his leisure by seeing what further he could learn about the habits of the flamingoes and other foreign birds, which were carefully kept in cages and fed from the hands of the visitors. For Britannicus and Titus, who often asked Persius to be their companion, there was the resource of the tennis-court, the gymnastic room, and rowing, bathing, and fishing in the lakes; and Persius, who had heard all about Epictetus from his young patron, sometimes let the little slave sit at his feet while he read choice passages of old Roman poems in works which had been found for him by the clever librarian.

The meals were held separately in the two villas, though sometimes all the guests were invited to Nero's table. He varied his amusements in every possible way. Sometimes he would take a long swim in the cold lake; sometimes he would fish with a purple line and a golden hook, though he caught fewer fish in a morning than Britannicus would catch in an hour. He delighted to spend hours at a time with the harpist Terpnos or the singer Diodorus, who trained him how to use what it had become the fashion to describe as his celestial voice.

He soon got tired of the small restraint upon his amusements which resulted from the presence of the graver guests across the bridge. But they helped to form an audience for him in the room which had been fitted up as a theatre. One evening he had been displaying his accomplishments to all the guests at both villas, and had been received by the listening slaves and courtiers with tumults of applause. The others were obliged, or felt themselves obliged, to join in the clapping; but Nero could read in their faces that they were unwilling listeners. Seneca blushed, and his smooth tongue stumbled, as he attempted to express his gratification. Burrus looked on with profound disapproval. A look of involuntary scorn stole over the grave features of Persius, whom Nero already hated, because the young man's virginal modesty formed such a contrast to his own shamelessness. But, worst of all, the blunt soldier, Vespasian, to the intense amusement of Titus and Britannicus, had first of all begun to nod, and then had fallen asleep with his mouth wide open, and had snored — had actually and audibly snored, so that all the

audience heard it, while Nero was chanting his own divine verses with the most bewitching trills of his own divine voice!

Nero, in his rage, half thought of having him arrested on the charge of high treason — an accusation of which the meshes were equally adapted to entangle the most daring criminals and the most trivial offenders. But when he poured out his wrath to Petronius, his elegant friend laughed immoderately, and pacified Nero's offended vanity by dwelling on Vespasian's somnolence as a proof of his vulgarity.

'I suppose, then,' said Nero, 'I must say with Horace, "*solvuntur risu tabulæ*"?'

'Yes,' said Petronius, 'and you may add "*tu missus abibis*." Why not make a clean sweep of these dreadful old fogies in the Villa Castor? Pliny has told us all we care to know about flamingoes and lampreys. Seneca's pomposities grow stale. We have been sufficiently amused for the present by the blushes of Persius, and the good Silius Italicus is as tedious as his own epic. Give them a respectful farewell. Send for Paris the actor, and Aliturus the pantomime, and some of your fairest slaves to wait on us at our choicest banquets. Let us dismiss this humbug of respectability and pluck the blossom of the days.'

The advice fell on congenial ears. It was intimated to the guests in the Villa Castor that they might present their respects to the Emperor, and disperse where they chose. They were not sorry to depart from such dubious neighbours as those in the Villa Pollux. Vespasian and Titus were rudely sent off the next morning, without being permitted to see Nero again. Flavia Domitilla accompanied them, and as the presence of Britannicus was always a trouble to Nero, he was allowed to spend the rest of the autumn in the humble Sabine villa of Vespasian's family at Phalacrine, near Reate, where he would not only have Titus as a companion, but also his cousins — the two young sons of Vespasian's brother, Flavius Sabinus.

'Among those dull farmers,' said Nero, 'he is not likely to have any nonsense put into his head. Let him eat beans and bacon, and grow as sluggish as his friends.'

To Nero and the fashionable nobles of his time every man was sluggish and plebeian who did not care to season his recreation with a variety of vices.

CHAPTER XVI

EVENTS IN THE VILLA POLLUX

> 'Who dares, who dares,
> In purity of manhood stand upright
> And say "This man 's a flatterer"? If one be,
> So are they all . . .
> the learned pate
> Ducks to the golden fool.'
>
> *Timon of Athens*, iv. 3.

More and more luxurious and irregular became the amusements of the Villa Pollux. Paganism is protected from complete exposure by the enormity of its own vices. To show the divine reformation wrought by Christianity it must suffice that, once for all, the Apostle of the Gentiles seized heathendom by the hair, and branded indelibly on her forehead the stigma of her shame.

Leaving altogether on one side the darker aspects of the life to which Nero and his boon companions now abandoned themselves, neither shall we dwell much upon

> 'Their gorgeous gluttonies and sumptuous feasts
> On citron table and Atlantic stone.'

If the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life could have brought to Nero and Otho any happiness, they might have been happy. They could lift to their lips the cup of pleasure crowned to the brim. They soon found it to be an envenomed goblet, sparkling with the wine of demons. The rage of luxury, the insanity of egotism, the abandonment to every form of self-indulgence, served only to plunge them into deeper lassitude, and, last of all, into more irretrievable disgust. For, though men have bodies, they still are spirits, and when their bodies have command over their spirits, they only become a lower kind of beast.

To Nero, while he was yet a boy, had been offered all that carnal minds think the highest boons. The ancient philosophers used to discuss the question, 'Whether any one would

still remain perfectly virtuous if he were endowed with the ring of Gyges, which had the power to make a man invisible.' To Nero had been given alike the ring of Gyges and the lamp of Aladdin. While he was still young and beautiful, and not ungifted, all that was fell and foul in the seductions of the Palace and the Amphitheatre assailed his feeble nature. It was hardly strange that his whole being gave way and he became a prodigy of wickedness. At heart, perhaps, he was not essentially worse than thousands of youths have been, but his crimes, unchecked by any limitations of law or of resources, were enacted under the glare of publicity, on the world's loftiest stage.

Nor must it be forgotten that he saw and enjoyed all the best, the loveliest, the most intoxicating that could be devised by an epoch which strove madly after pleasure. Thus, when Paris and Aliturus came to the villa, the guests saw in those two actors the most perfect grace set off by the highest advantages, and trained for years by the most artistic skill. They represented the finished result of all that the world could produce in seductive art. Such actors, originally selected for their beauty and genius, made it the effort of their lives to express by the poetry of movement every burning passion and soft desire which can agitate the breast. Their rhythmic action, their mute music, their inimitable grace of motion in the dance, brought home to the spectator each scene which they impersonated more powerfully than description, or painting, or sculpture. Carried away by the glamour of involuntary delusion, the gazers seemed to see before them every incident which they chose to represent. Nothing was neglected which seemed likely to add to the pleasure of the audience. The rewards of success were splendid — wealth, popularity, applause from numberless spectators, the passionate admiration of society, the partiality even of emperors and empresses, and all the power which such influence bestowed. A successful mimic actor, when he sprang on the stage in his glittering and close-fitting dress, knew that if he could once exercise on the multitude his potent spell he might easily become the favourite of the rulers of the world, as Bathyllus was of Mæcenas, and Mnester of Caligula, and another Paris was of the Empress Domitia.

Paris was a Greek, and his face was a perfect example of

the fine Greek ideal, faultless in its lines and youthful contour. Aliturus was by birth a Jew, and was endowed with the splendid beauty which still makes some young Arabs the types of perfect manhood. Both of them danced after supper on the day which succeeded their arrival, and it was hard to say which of them excelled the other.[1]

First Paris danced, in his fleshings of the softest Canusian wool, dyed a light red. His dress revealed the perfect outline of a figure that united fineness with strength. He represented in pantomimic dance the scene of Achilles in the island of Scyros. He brought every incident and person before their eyes — the virgins as they spun in the palace of their father, Lycomedes; the fair youth concealed as a virgin in the midst of them, and called Pyrrha from his golden locks; the maiden Deidamia, whom he loved; the eager summons of Ulysses at his gate; the ear-shattering trumpet of Diomedes; the presents brought by the disguised ambassadors; the young warrior betraying himself by the eagerness with which he turns from jewels and ornaments to nodding helmet and bright cuirass; the doffing of his feminine apparel; the leaping forth in his gleaming panoply. Nothing could be more marvellous than the whole impersonation. So vivid was the illusion that the guests of Nero could hardly believe that they had seen but one young man before them, and not a company of varied characters.

Yet hardly less subtle was the kindling of the imagination when Aliturus 'danced,' as it was called, the 'Death of Hector' in the tragic style which had first been introduced by the celebrated Bathyllus of Alexandria. They seemed to see the hero bid farewell to his Andromache, and go bounding forth to meet the foe; to see enacted before them the flight of Hector; the deceitful spectre of Deiphobus; the combat; the dying prophecy; the corpse of the gallant Trojan dragged round the walls of Troy; Priam and Hecuba tearing their grey locks. They seemed to hear the wild wail of Andromache, the tender plaint of Helen, the frenzied utterances of Cassandra; and when the scene ended there was not one of them who was not thrilled through and through with pity, with terror, with admiration.

These scenes were innocent and not ignoble, but softer and

[1] Note 21. — Ancient dancing.

more voluptuous impersonations followed; for when another and less known actor named Hylas — painted blue, and dragging a fish's tail behind him — had acted the part of the sea-god Glaucus, to rest the two chief performers, then Paris set forth the story of Ariadne and Bacchus; and Aliturus sank to yet lower depths in dancing the favourite pantomime of Leda.

Such were among the amusements of Nero's evenings, and part of the pleasure consisted in knowing that he and his guests were enjoying at their leisure a near view of the unequalled genius which enraptured the shouting myriads of Rome when witnessed from a distance after long hours of waiting to secure a place. Further, they had the advantage of watching the speaking faces of the mimists, which in the theatre were hidden by a mask. It is needless to add that Nero rewarded with immense donations the artists whose skill he so passionately admired. And yet for Paris it had been happier if, instead of dazzling the multitude, he had remained the humble slave of Domitia. For in later days Nero, envying him the tumults of applause he won, tried to emulate his skill. Paris did his best to teach him, but the attempt was hopeless. Nothing could then make the obese form of the Emperor graceful, or his thin legs agile. And since he could not rival him, he made the poor wretch pay the penalty by putting him to death.

But no such dread foreboding was in the happy actor's mind as he witnessed the spell which he cast over the minds of his audience — and audience it might fitly be called, for the actor had *spoken to* them in the eloquence of rhythmic gesture.

The conversation turned naturally on the art of dancing.

'Paris,' said Petronius, whose æsthetic sympathies had been intensely gratified, 'I know not whether you missed the usual accompaniments of pipes and flutes, and still more the thundering reverberations of applause from the enraptured myriads, but I never heard you to greater advantage.'

'Heard me? *Saw* me, you mean,' said Paris, with a pleasant smile.

'No!' said Petronius, 'we have heard, not seen, you. You have not spoken a word, but your feet and your hands have surpassed the eloquence even of lips "tinct with Hyblean honeycombs."'

'You remind me of what Demetrius the Cynic said to me,' answered Paris.

'What was that?'

'Do not think me vain if I tell the story,' said the actor. 'I do not tell it in my own honour, but only for the glory of my art. Demetrius had been railing and snarling at us poor pantomimes, and said that the only pleasure of the spectators was derived, not from our dancing, but from the flutes and songs. I asked him to let me show him a specimen of what I could do.'

'Happy Demetrius!' said Lucan.

'He was fair-minded enough to consent, and I danced to him the story of Mars and Venus. I tried to bring before him their love, their betrayal by Helios, the rage and jealousy of Vulcan, their capture in the golden net, their confusion, the entreaties of Venus, the intercession of the gods. Demetrius was fairly conquered, and he said to me, "Fellow!" (you observe that he was anything but civil!), "I don't merely see but I hear your acting, and you seem to me to speak with your very hands."'

'Well done, Demetrius!' said Otho. 'And perhaps you don't know, Paris, that a Greek writer, Lesbonax, calls you, not philosophers, but *cheirosophers* — hand-wise.'

'I can cap your story, Paris,' said Nero. 'The other day a barbarian nobleman from Pontus came to me on some foreign business and brought me some splendid presents. When he left I asked him if I could do anything for him. "Yes," he said. "Will you make me a present of the beautiful dancer whom I saw in the theatre?" That was you, Paris; and of course I told him that you were much too precious to be given away, and that, if I did, we should have Rome in an uproar. "But," I said, "of what possible use would he be to you?" "He can interpret things without words," he replied; "and I want some one to explain my wishes to my barbarous neighbours"!'

'Nobody has said any of these fine things about *me*,' remarked Aliturus, ruefully.

'Well, I will tell you a compliment paid to you, Aliturus,' said Petronius. 'Another barbarian, who came to me with a letter of introduction from the Proconsul of Africa, saw you act a scene which involved five impersonations. He was

amazed at your versatility. "That man," he observed, "has but one body, but he has many minds."'

'Thank you, kind Petronius!' said Aliturus.

'But now tell us,' asked Nero, 'whether in acting you really feel the emotions you express.'

'When the character is new to us we feel them intensely,' said the Jewish pantomime. 'Have you never heard, Cæsar, what happened to Pylades, when he played the part of the mad hero of "Ajax"? It seemed as if he really went mad with the hero whom he personated. He sprang on one of the attendants who was beating time to the music, and rent off his robe. The actor who represented the victorious Ulysses stood by him in triumph, and Pylades, tearing a heavy flute from the hands of one of the choraulæ, dealt Ulysses so violent a blow on the head that he broke the flute and would have broken the head too, if the actor had not been protected by his helmet. He even hurled javelins at Augustus himself. The audience in the theatre was so powerfully affected by the passion of the scene that they went mad too, and leapt up from their seats and shouted, and flung off their garments. Finally, Pylades, unconscious of what he was doing, walked down from the stage to the orchestra and took his seat between two Consulars, who were rather alarmed lest Ajax should flagellate them with his scourge as he had been flagellating the cattle which in his madness he took for Greeks.'

'A curious and interesting anecdote, my Aliturus,' said Petronius; 'but Paris has not yet told us whether he misses the multitudinous applause of Rome.'

'All Rome is here,' said Paris with a bow to the Emperor. 'We actors need nothing but the sunshine of approval, and did not the sun, even before it rose above the horizon, bathe Nero in its rays?'

'So my nurses have told me,' said Nero.

'Trust an actor to pay a compliment,' whispered Vatinius to Tigellinus.

'Or a poet either,' said Tigellinus, with a glance at Lucan.

'Or an adventurer and a parasite either,' returned the irascible Spaniard, who had overheard the innuendo.

'Now, if I am to be the *arbiter elegantiarum*, I will allow no quarrels,' said Petronius. 'And I at least am grateful to Paris and Aliturus, and mean to show my gratitude by a com-

pliment. Don't class me among the poets who recite in the dog-days, for my little poem — written while Paris was dancing "Achilles"— is only four lines long. Spare my blushes and let Lucan — as he is a poet — read it.'

'Don't let him read it,' whispered Tigellinus; 'he will read it badly on purpose.'

But Petronius handed his little waxen tablets to Lucan, who, with a glance of disdain at Tigellinus, read with perfect expression the four celebrated lines:

> 'He fights, plays, revels, loves and whirls, and stands,
> Speaks with mute eloquence and rhythmic hands.
> Silence is voiceful through each varying part,
> In each fair feature — 't is the crown of Art.'[1]

A loud exclamation of '*Euge!*' and '*Σοφῶς!*' burst from the hearers when Lucan had read these admirable lines; and the two actors repaid the poet by the most gracious of their bows and smiles. Nor did they confine their gratitude to smiles, but gave further specimens of some of the laughable dances which were in vogue, such as 'the owl' and 'the grimace,' ending with a spectacle at once graceful and innocent — namely, the lovely flower-dance with its refrain of

> 'Where are my roses, where my violets, where my parsleys fair?'

They went to bed that night each of them the happy possessor of twelve thousand sesterces. When Agrippina, a month later, heard this, she reproached Nero for his gross extravagance.

'What did I give them?' he asked.

'You paid them twelve thousand sesterces each for a night's dancing.'

'Did I?' said Nero, glad to show his defiance. 'I never knew before that I was so mean;' and he immediately ordered the sum to be doubled.

[1] 'De Pantomimo.

> 'Pugnat, ludit, amat, bacchatur, vertitur, astat,
> Illustrat verum, cuncta decore replet;
> Tot linguæ, tot membra viro: mirabilis ars est
> Quæ facit articulos, ore silente, loqui.'

CHAPTER XVII

AMUSEMENTS OF AN EMPEROR

Οὐ παύσομαι τὰς Χάριτας
Μούσαις συγκαταμιγνύς.
EURIPIDES.

'Esclave ! apporte-moi des roses,
Le parfum des roses est doux.'
VICTOR HUGO.

AMONG the pleasant distractions of the villa, the dilettantism of literature and art were not forgotten. Nero regarded it as one of his serious occupations to practice singing and harp-playing. Afterwards, when his friends gathered round him, they would write verses, or recite, or lounge on purple couches, listening to Epaphroditus as he read to them the last news from the teeming gossip of Rome. Satires and scandalous stories often created a flutter of excitement in the reception-rooms of the capital, and were keenly enjoyed by all, except those, often entirely innocent and worthy persons, who were perfectly defenceless against these calumnies, and felt them like sparks of fire, or poisoned arrows rankling in the flesh.

One morning, when the stay of the courtiers at the villa was drawing to a close, Epaphroditus announced to them that he had a sensation for them of the first magnitude. The trifle which he would read to them was perhaps a little broad in parts, but he was sure that Cæsar would excuse it. It was called, he said, by a curious name, *Apokolokyntosis*. This was in truth a clever invention of the librarian himself, for he did not venture to mention its real title, which was *Ludus de morte Claudii Cæsaris*.

'Apocolokyntosis?' asked Nero; 'why, that means gourdification or pumpkinification! One has heard of deification, but what on earth does "gourdification" mean?'

'Perhaps, Cæsar, in this instance it means the same thing,' said Epaphroditus; 'but have I your permission to read it?'

The guests — Lucan among them — settled themselves in easy positions and listened. The reader had not finished a

dozen sentences before they found that they were hearing the most daring and brilliant satire which antiquity had as yet produced.

It was a satire on the death of Claudius, and it was not long before peal after peal of astonished laughter rang from all the group.

It began by a jesting refusal to quote any authority for the events the writer was going to relate. If any one wanted evidence he referred to the senator who had sworn that he had seen Drusilla mounting to heaven, and would be equally ready to swear that he had seen Claudius stalking thitherward with unequal steps along the Appian road, by which Augustus and Tiberius had also gone to heaven.

'It was late autumn, verging on winter — it was, in fact, October 13. As for the hour, that was uncertain, but might be generally described as noontide, when Claudius was trying to die. Since he found it hard to die, Mercury, who had always admired his learning, began to abuse one of the Fates for keeping him alive for sixty-three years. Why could not she allow the astrologers to be right for once, who had been predicting his demise every month? Yet, no wonder! for how could they cast the horoscope of a man so imperfect that he could hardly be said to have ever been born? "I only meant," pleads Clotho, "to keep him alive a little longer, till he had made all the rest of the world Roman citizens. But since you order it, he shall die." Thereupon she opened a casket, and took out three spindles — one on which was wound the life-thread of Claudius, and on the other two those of the two idiots, Augurinus and Baba, both of whom, she said, should die about the same time, that Claudius might have fitting company.

'She said, and broke short the royal period of stolid life.' At this point the author bursts into poetry, and describes how Lachesis chooses a thread of gold instead of wool, and joyously weaves a web of surpassing loveliness. The life it represents is to surpass the years of Tithonus and of Nestor. Phœbus comes and cheers her on her task with heavenly song, bidding her weave on.

'Let him whose thread you are weaving,' he sings, 'exceed the space of mortal life, for he is like me in countenance, like me in beauty, and not inferior in song or voice. He shall

accord happy times to the weary, and shall burst the silence of the laws, like the rising of the morning or the evening star, or of rosy dawn at sunrise. Such a Cæsar is at hand, such a Nero shall Rome now behold! his bright countenance beams with attempered lustre, and his neck is lovely with its flowing locks!' So sang Apollo, and Lachesis did even more than he required. Meanwhile, Claudius died while listening to the comedians. Then, after a touch of inconceivable coarseness, the writer adds, 'What happened on earth I need not tell you, for we none of us forget our own felicity, but I will tell you what happened in heaven.' Jupiter is informed that a being is approaching who is tall, grey-haired, and looks menacing, because he shakes his head and drags his right foot. He is asked to what country he belongs, and returns an entirely unintelligible answer in no distinguishable dialect. As Hercules is a travelled person, Jupiter sends him to enquire to what class of human beings the new-comer appertains. Hercules had never seen a portent like this, with a voice like that of a sea-monster, and thought that this must be his thirteenth labour; but, on looking, perceived that it was a sort of man, and addressed him in Greek. Claudius answers in Greek, and would have imposed on Hercules, had not Fever, who had accompanied Claudius, said, 'He is not from Ilium; he is a genuine Gaul, born near Lyons, and, like a true Gaul, he took Rome.' Claudius got into a rage at this, but no one could comprehend his jargon; he had made a signal that Fever should be decapitated, and one might have thought that all present were his freedmen, for no one cared for what he said. Hercules addresses him in severe tones, and Claudius says, 'You of all the gods, Hercules, ought to know me and support me, for I sat all July and August listening to lawyers before your temple.' A discussion follows, and then Jupiter asks the gods how they will vote. Janus thinks there are too many gods already. Godhead has become cheap of late. He votes that no more men shall be made gods. Claudius, however, since he is akin to the divine Augustus, and has himself made Livia a goddess, seems likely to gain the majority of votes; but Augustus rises and pleads against this strange candidate for godship with indignant eloquence. 'This man,' he pleads, 'caused the death of my daughter and my grand-daughter, the two Julias, and my descendant, L. Silanus. Also he has

condemned many unheard. Jupiter, who has reigned so many years, has only broken one leg — the leg of Vulcan — and has once hung Juno from heaven: but Claudius, inspired by female jealousies and the intrigues of a varletry of pampered freedmen, has killed his wife, Messalina, and a multitude of others. Who would believe that *they* were gods, if they made this portent a god? Rather let him be expelled from Olympus within three days.'

Accordingly, Mercury puts a rope round his neck, and drags him towards Tartarus. On the way they meet a vast crowd, who all rejoice except a few lawyers. It was, in fact, the funeral procession of Claudius himself, and he wants to stop and look at it; but Mercury covers him with a veil, that no one may recognize him, and drags him along. Narcissus had preceded him by a shorter route, and Mercury bids the freedman hurry on to announce the advent of Claudius to the shades. Narcissus speedily arrives among them, gouty though he was, since the descent is steep, and shouts in a loud voice, 'Claudius Cæsar is coming.' Immediately a crowd of shades shouts out, 'We have found him; let us rejoice!' They advance to meet him — among them Messalina and her lover, Mnester the pantomime, and numbers of his kinsmen whom he had put to death. 'Why, all my friends are here!' exclaims Claudius, quite pleased. 'How did you all get here?' 'Do *you* ask us?' said Pedo Pompeius; 'you most cruel of men, who killed us all?' Pedo drags him before the judgment-seat of Æacus, and accuses him on the Cornelian law of having put to death thirty senators, three hundred and fifteen Roman knights, and two hundred and twenty-one other persons. Claudius, terrified, looks round him for an advocate, but does not see one. Publius Petronius wants to plead for him, but is not allowed to do so. He is condemned. Deep silence falls on them all, as they wait to hear his punishment. It is to be as endless as that of Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Ixion; it is to be a toil and a desire futile and frustrate and without end. He is to throw dice forever in a dice-box without a bottom!

No sooner said than done! Claudius began at once to seek the dice, which forever escaped him. Every time he attempted to throw them they slipped through, and the throw, though constantly attempted, could never be performed.

Then all of a sudden appears Caligula, and demands that Claudius should be recognised as his slave. He produces witnesses who swear that they have seen Caligula scourge him and slap him, and beat him. He is assigned to Caligula, who hands him over to his freedman, Menander, to be his legal assessor.

Such was this daring satire, of which we can hardly estimate the audacity and wit — written as it was within a year of events which the Roman Senate and Roman people professed to regard as profoundly solemn.

Nero was convulsed with laughter throughout, and was equally delighted by the insults upon his predecessor and the flattery of himself.

When the speaker's voice ceased, a burst of applause came from the lips of the hearers; and Lucan turned to the gratified Nero and repeated the lines which described his radiant beauty, his song, and the brilliant prognostications of his coming reign.

'Yes,' said Otho; 'that is true poetry —

> '"Such is our Cæsar; such, O happy Rome,
> Thy radiant Nero gilds his Palace home;
> His gentle looks with tempered splendour shine,
> Round his fair neck his golden tresses twine."'—

and, in the intimacy of friendship, he ventured to pass his hand over the soft golden hair which flowed over the neck of the proud and happy youth.

'How witty it is, and how powerful!' said Petronius. 'Who could have written it?'

Lucan gave a meaning smile. He had not been dismissed from the Villa Castor with the other guests, because the Emperor, although jealous of him, could not help admiring his fiery, original, and declamatory genius.

'You smile, Lucan,' said Otho; 'surely your uncle Seneca — that grave and stately philosopher — could not have written this sparkling farce?'

'Seneca?' said Vestinus; 'what, he who grovelled at the feet of the freedman Polybius, and told him that the one supreme consolation to him for the loss of his wife would be the divine beneficence of the Pumpkinity whom here he paints as an imbecile slaverer?'

'I think Seneca deserves to be brought up on a charge of treason, if he really wrote it,' said Tigellinus.

'Nonsense, Tigellinus,' said Petronius; 'you need not be so sanguinary. The thing is but a jest, after all. On the stage we allow the freest and broadest jokes against the twelve greater gods, and even the Capitoline Jupiter; why should not a wit jest harmlessly upon the deified Claudius, now that he has died of eating a mushroom?'

'You are right,' said Nero; 'the author is too witty to be punished; and now I always call mushrooms "the food of the gods." But *was* Seneca the writer?' he asked, turning to Lucan.

'I think I may say quite confidently that he was *not*,' said Lucan, a little alarmed by the savage remark of Tigellinus. In point of fact, he believed that the brochure had been written by his own father, Marcus Annæus Mela, but he felt it desirable that the secret should be kept.

'We all know that the Annæi are loyal,' sneered Tigellinus.

'As loyal, at any rate, as men who would sell their souls for an aureus,' answered the Spaniard. He looked full at Tigellinus, who remembered the scene, and put it down in his note-book for the day of vengeance.

But Petronius loved elegance, and did not care for quarrels, and he tried to turn the conversation from unpleasant subjects. 'Lucan,' he asked, 'have you written any verses about Nero? If so, pray let us have the pleasure of hearing them.'

Lucan was far from unwilling to show that he too could flatter, and he recited the lines of colossal adulation from the opening of the 'Pharsalia.' Even the civil wars, he sang, with all their slaughter, were not too heavy a price to pay for the blessing of having obtained a Nero; and he begs him to be careful what part of Olympus he chooses for his future residence, lest the burden of his greatness should disturb the equilibrium of the world![1]

Nero had just heard the deification of Claudius torn to shreds with mortal sarcasm, but his own vanity was impervious to any wound, and he eagerly drank in the adulation which — with no more sincerity than that which had been addressed to his predecessor by the Senate and people

[1] Note 22. — Lucan's flatteries.

of Rome — assured him of the honour of plenary divinity among the deities of heaven in whom, nevertheless, he scarcely even affected to believe.

He turned to Petronius and asked him to recite his poem on the Sack of Troy. Petronius did so, and the Emperor listened with eager interest. It was a subject which fascinated him.

'Ah!' he said, 'to see a city in flames — that would be worth living for! I have tried to write something on that subject myself.'

All present, of course, pressed him to favour them with his poem, and after a little feminine show of reluctance, and many protestations of mock modesty, he read them, in an affected voice, some verses which were marked in every phrase by the falsetto of the age. It was evident that they had been painfully elaborated. Indeed, as they looked at the note-book from which the Emperor read they saw that the *labor limæ* had been by no means wanting. The book, which afterwards fell into the hands of Suetonius, was scratched and scrawled over in every direction, and it showed that many a turn of expression had been altered twenty times before it became tinkling enough and fantastic enough to suit Nero's taste. It was clear from the tone in which he read them that the most bizarre lines were exactly those that pleased him best, and they were therefore the ones which his flatterers selected for their loudest applause.

'"Filled the grim horns with Mimallonean buzz"' —

repeated Lucan. 'How energetic! how picturesque!'

'He is laughing at you in his sleeve, Cæsar,' whispered Tigellinus; 'and he thinks his own most impromptu line far superior.'

Lucan did not overhear the remark, and he proceeded to quote and praise the three lines on the river Tigris, which

'"Deserts the Persian realms he loved to lave,
And to non-seekers shows his sought-for wave."

Now those lines I feel sure will live.'

'Of course they will,' said Tigellinus, 'long after your poems are forgotten.'

The young poet only shrugged his shoulders, and turned

on the adventurer a glance of disdain. Petronius, however, who disliked and despised Tigellinus, was now thoroughly disgusted by his malignity, and did not hesitate to express his contempt. 'Tigellinus,' he said, 'if you are so rude I shall ask Cæsar to dismiss you. What nonsense on your part to pretend to know anything about poetry! You know even less than Calvisius Sabinus, who confounds Achilles with Ulysses, and has bought ten slaves who know all the poets by heart to prompt him when he makes a mistake.' [1]

Tigellinus reddened with anger, but he did not venture to reply.

'For my part,' said Senecio, 'I prefer the line

> '"Thou who didst chine the long-ribb'd Apennine,"

not to speak of the fine effect of the spondaic, there is the daring image.'

'There is something finer than both,' said Petronius, and he quoted a line of real beauty which Seneca has preserved for us in his 'Natural Questions,' and in which Nero describes the ruffled iridescence of a dove's neck:

> 'Fair Cytherea's startled doves illume
> With sheeny lustre every glancing plume.' [2]

'Many,' said the polished courtier, 'have seen the mingled amethyst and emerald on the necks of doves and peacocks, but it has been reserved for Cæsar to describe it.'

Somehow or other, in spite of all they said, Nero was not satisfied. He had an uneasy misgiving that all of them except Petronius — whom he knew to be genuinely good-natured — were only fooling him to the top of his bent. Not that this misgiving at all disturbed his conceit. He was convinced that he was a first-rate poet, as well as a first-rate singer and lyrist, and indeed a first-rate artist in all respects. It was the thing of which he was most proud, and if these people were only *pretending* to recognise his enormous merits, that was simply the result of their jealousy.

'Thank you, friends,' he said. 'What you say of me,

[1] Sen. *Ep.* 21.

[2] Sen. *Nat. Quæst.* i. 5: 'Colla Cytheriacæ splendent agitata columbæ. Ut ait Nero Cæsar disertissime.'

Lucan, is very kind, but' — he felt it necessary to show his superiority by a little criticism — 'I should not recommend you to publish your poem just yet. It is crude in parts. It is too Spanish and provincial. It wants a great deal of polishing before it can reach the æsthetic standard.'

Lucan bowed, and bit his lip. He felt that among these poetasters he was like a Triton among minnows, and his sense of mortification was so bitter that he could not trust himself to speak, lest he should risk his head by insulting Nero to his face.

The group broke up. Only Petronius, Paris, and Tigellinus remained.

'Petronius,' said Nero, 'you are a genuine poet. What do you think of Persius and Lucan as poets?'

'Lucan is more of a rhetorician than a poet,' said Petronius, 'and Persius more of a Stoic pedagogue. Both have merits, but neither of them can say anything simply and naturally. They are laboured, artificial, declamatory, monotonous, and more or less unoriginal. Their "honeyed globules of words" are only a sign of decadence.'[1]

'And what do you think of *my* poetry?' asked the Emperor, sorely thirsting for a compliment.

'A Cæsar must be supreme in all he does,' said Petronius, with one of his enigmatical smiles.

He rose, and bowed as he left the room, leaving Nero puzzled and dissatisfied.

'Oh, Paris!' exclaimed Nero, flinging his arm round the actor's neck, 'you alone are to be envied. You are a supreme artist. No one is jealous of you. When I see you on the stage, moving the people at your will to tears or to laughter, or kindling them to the most delicious emotions — when I hear the roar of applause which greets you as you stand forth in all your grace, and make the huge theatre ring with your fine penetrating voice, I often wish we could change our parts, and I be the actor, and you the Emperor.'

'You mock a poor mummer, Cæsar,' said Paris; 'but if I am to amuse you after the banquet to-night you must let me go and arrange something with Aliturus.'

Nero was left alone with Tigellinus. He yawned wearily.

[1] Petron. *Sat.* 1, 'Melliti verborum globuli.'

'How tedious all life is!' he said. 'Well, never mind, there is the banquet of the night to look forward to.'

'Yes,' said Tigellinus, 'and when we are heated with wine we will wander out into the grounds; and in the caves and winding pathways Petronius and Crispinilla have invented a new amusement for you.'

'What is it?'

'Do not ask me, Cæsar, and you will all the more enjoy its novelty.'

'Yes, but our time here is rapidly drawing to a close, and then comes Rome again, and all the boredom of the Senate, and of hearing causes, and entertaining dull people of consequence. And there I must more or less play at propriety.'

'Why must you, Cæsar? Cannot you do exactly as you like? Who is there to question you?'

'My mother, Agrippina, if no one else.'

'You have only one reason to fear the Augusta.'

'What is that?'

'Because, Cæsar, as I have already warned you, she is making much of Britannicus. I have reason to believe that she is also plotting to secure the elevation of Rubellius Plautus or Sulla. She is not at all too old to marry either of them, and both of them have imperial blood in their veins.'

'Rubellius Plautus?' asked Nero; 'why, he is a peaceful pedant. And that miserable creature Sulla cares for nothing but his dinner.'

'We shall see in time,' said Tigellinus; 'but meanwhile, so long as Britannicus lives — '

'Finish your sentence.'

'So long as Britannicus lives, Nero is not safe.'

Nero sank into a gloomy reverie. He had not suspected that the dark-eyed adventurer had designs as deep as those of Sejanus himself. That guilty and intriguing minister of Tiberius was only a Roman knight, and the whole family of Germanicus, as well as the son and the grandson of Drusus, stood in the direct line of descent as heirs to the throne. Yet he had for years worked on with the deliberate intention of clearing every one of them from his path, and climbing to that throne himself.

Why should not Tigellinus follow a similiar course? He had persuaded Nero that he knew something about soldiership. He had made himself popular among the Prætorian guards. Burrus might be got rid of, and Tigellinus, by pandering to Nero's worst instincts, encouraging his alarms, and awakening his jealousies, might come to be accepted as an indispensable guardian of his interests, and so be made the Prætorian Præfect. Once let him gain that position, and he might achieve almost anything. Octavia would evidently be childless. Nero was the last of his race. It would be just as well to get rid, beforehand, of all possible rivals to his ambitious designs. Plautus and Sulla might wait, but nothing could be done till Britannicus was put out of the way. It would then be more easy to deal with Agrippina and with Octavia.

So he devised; and the spirits of evil laughed, knowing that he was but paving the road for his own headlong destruction.

But that night no one was gayer and more smiling than he at the soft Ionian festival, where they were waited on by boys robed in white and crowned with roses. It had been spread in the *viridarium*, a green garden surrounded by trees cut and twisted into quaint shapes of birds and beasts by the *ars topiaria*. The larger dishes were spread on the marble rim of a fountain, while the smaller ones floated among the water-lilies in vessels made in the shape of birds or fish. By one novel and horrible refinement of luxury, a fish was caught and boiled alive during the feast in a transparent vase, that the guests might watch its dying gleams of ruby and emerald. When the drinking was finished they went into the groves and gardens of the villa, and the surprise which had been prepared for Nero was a loose sylvan pageant. Every grove and cavern and winding walk had been illuminated at twilight by lamps which hung from tree to tree. In the open spaces naiads were bathing in the lake, and leaving trails of light in the water, and uplifting their white arms, which glittered like gold in the moonlight; and youths with torches sprang out of the lurking-places dressed like fauns or satyrs, and danced with maidens in the guise of hamadryads, and crowned the guests with flowers, and led them to new dances and new revelries, while their cries and songs woke

innumerable echoes, which mocked the insulted majesty of the night.

And in those very caves, four hundred years later, there came and lived a boy a little younger than Nero was, and amid the pleasances of the villas, which had fallen to ruin, and in the lonely caverns high up among the hills, he made his solitary home. He had deserted the world, disgusted and disillusioned with the wickedness of Rome. And once, when the passions of the flesh seemed to threaten him, he rushed out of his cave and rolled his naked body on the thorns where now the roses grow. And multitudes were struck by his holiness and self-devotion, and monasteries rose on every crag, and the scene, once desecrated by the enchantments of the sorceress Sense, was purified by the feet of saintly men, and the cavern where young slaves had lurked in the guise of the demons of the Gentiles is now called the Holy Cave.

That boy of fourteen was Benedict. The name of Nero has rotted for more than eighteen centuries, but to this day the memory of St. Benedict is fragrant as his own roses; for

> 'Only the actions of the just
> Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.'

CHAPTER XVIII

VESPASIAN'S FARM

'At secura quies, et nescia fallere vita,
Dives opum variarum, at latis otia fundis,
. . . . . .
Mugitusque boum, mollesque sub arbore somni,
. . . . . .
Et patiens operum exiguoque assueta juventus,
Sacra Deum, sanctique patres.'
VIRG. *Georg.* ii. 467.

OCTAVIA was left in the comparative desertion of the Villa Castor, without even the homely companionship of Vespasian's wife. The respectable guests had departed. There was scarcely a person about her to whom she could speak. As for her young husband, he treated her with habitual neglect and open scorn. His conduct towards her was due partly to the indifference which he had always felt, partly to jealousy — lest he should be thought to owe the Empire to his union with her. He therefore followed his own devices; and she desired no closer intercourse with him, for she shrank from the satyr which lay beneath his superficial graces. She was best pleased that he should be out of her sight. The void of an unloved heart was preferable to the scenes which took place between them when Nero's worst qualities were evoked by the repulsion which she could not wholly conceal. Accustomed to hourly adulation, it was intolerable to him that from those who constituted his home circle he never received the shadow of a compliment. He was disturbed by the sense that those who knew him most intimately saw through him most completely. His mother did not abstain from telling him what he really was with an almost brutal frankness; his wife seemed to shrink from him as though there were pollution in his touch.

As there was little occasion for him to have any regard for conventionalities in the retirement of Subiaco, he rarely paid

the Empress even a formal visit — rarely even crossed the bridge which divided one villa from the other.

Octavia spent the long hours in loneliness. She sometimes relieved the tedium of her days by sending loving letters to her brother at Phalacrine, and sometimes summoned one of the young slave-maidens to sit and read to her. While Nero associated with the most worthless slaves, Octavia selected for her attendants the girls whose modest demeanour had won her notice, and whom she generally found to be Christians. Christianity, though overwhelmed with slanders, was not yet suppressed by law; and in the lowest ranks of society, where no one cared what religion any one held, the sole reason which induced the slaves to conceal their faith was the ridicule which the acknowledgment of it involved. The cross, which was in those days the gibbet of the vilest malefactors, was to all the world an emblem only of shame and horror. It was a thing scarcely to be mentioned, because its associations of disgrace and agony were so intense as to disturb the equanimity of the luxurious. And when a Christian slave was taunted with the gibe that he worshipped 'a crucified malefactor,' how could he explain a truth which was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness?

Octavia, whom sorrow had taught to be kind, was gentle in her demeanour to her slaves. The multitude of girls who waited on a patrician matron had a terrible time of it when their mistresses happened to be in an ill-humour. The gilded boudoirs of the Aventine not unfrequently rang with shrieks. As one entered the stately hall one heard the clanking chain of the *ostiarius*, who, with his dog and his staff, occupied the little cell by the entrance; and if a visitor came a little too soon for the banquet he might be greeted by the cries which followed the whistling strokes of the scourge, or might meet some slave-girl with dishevelled hair and bleeding cheeks, rushing from the room of a mistress whom she had infuriated by the accidental displacement of a curl. The slaves of Octavia had no such cruelties to dread. Lydus, who kept her chair; Hilara, who arranged her robes; Aurelia, who had charge of her lap-dog; Aponia, who adorned her tresses; Verania, who prepared her sandals, had nothing to fear from her. There was not one of her slaves who did not love the young mistress,

whose lot seemed less happy than that of the humblest of them all.

And thus it happened that Tryphæna and others of her slaves were not afraid to speak freely, when she seemed to invite their confidence. From Britannicus she had heard what Pomponia had taught him; she had found from these meek followers of the 'foreign superstition,' that their beliefs and practice were inconceivably unlike the caricatures of them which were current among the populace. Because all men hated them, they were accused of hating all men; but Octavia found that love, no less than purity and meekness, was among their most essential duties. She was obliged to exercise the extremest caution in the expression of her own opinions, but she felt an interest deeper than she could express in all that Tryphæna told her of the chief doctrines of Christianity. And though she could scarcely form any judgment on what she heard, she felt a sense of support in truths which, if they did not convince her reason, yet kindled her imagination and touched her heart. One doctrine of the Christians came home to her with quickening power — the doctrine of the life everlasting. In Paganism that doctrine had no practical existence. The poets' dream of meadows of asphodel and islands of the blest, where Achilles and Tydides unbound the helmets from their shadowy hair, and where the thin *eidola* of kings and heroes pursued a semblance of their earthly life, had little meaning for her. Like Britannicus, she was fond of reading the best Greek poets. But there was no hopefulness in them. In Pindar she read —

'By night, by day,
The glorious sun
Shines equal, where the blest,
Their labours done,
Repose forever in unbroken rest.' [1]

And in Homer —

'Thee to the Elysian plain, earth's farthest end,
Where Rhadamanthus dwells the gods shall send;
There mortals easiest-pass the careless hour,
No lingering winter there, nor snow, nor shower;
But Ocean ever, to refresh mankind,
Breathes the shrill spirit of the western wind.'

[1] Pind. *Ol.* ii. 119.

But she had only to unroll the manuscript a little further, and was chilled to the heart by the answer of Achilles to the greeting of Ulysses :—

> 'Talk not of reigning in this dolorous gloom,
> Nor think vain words, he cried, can ease my doom
> Better by far laboriously to bear
> A weight of woe, and breathe the vital air,
> Slave to the meanest hind that begs his bread,
> Than reign the sceptred monarch of the dead !'

And though Cicero had written his Tusculan disputations to prove the doctrine of immortality, had he not, in his letters and speeches, spoken of that doctrine as a mere pleasing speculation, which might be discussed with interest, but which no one practically held ? Yet to these good Christians that doctrine was an unshakable conviction, a truth which consoled their heaviest afflictions. To them the eternal, though unseen, was ever present. It was not something future, but a condition of which they breathed the atmosphere both here and now. To them the temporal was the shadowy ; the eternal was the only real.

While Octavia was thus silently going through the divine education which was to prepare her for all that was to come, Britannicus was supremely happy in the Sabine farm. Its homeliness and security furnished a delightful contrast to the oppressive splendour of the Palace at Rome. There, in the far wild country, he had none but farm labourers about him, except the members of the Flavian family, who, on the father's side, rose but little above the country folk. He was as happy as the day was long. He could lay aside all thoughts of rank and state, could dress as he liked, and do as he liked, and roam over the pleasant hills, and fish in the mountain streams, with no chance of meeting any one but simple peasant lads. With Titus and his two cousins, young Flavius Sabinus and Flavius Clemens, he could find sympathy in every mood, whether grave or gay. Titus with his rude health, his sunny geniality, his natural courtesy — a boy 'tingling with life to the finger tips' — was a friend in whose society it was impossible to be dull. Flavius Clemens was a youth of graver nature. The shadow of far-distant martyrdom, which would dash to the ground his splendid earthly prospects, seemed to play over his early years. He had already been brought into contact with Christian in-

fluences, and showed the thoughtfulness, the absence of intriguing ambition, and the dislike to pagan amusements, which stamped him in the vulgar eyes of his contemporaries as a youth of 'most contemptible indolence.' A fourth boy was often with them. It was Domitian, the younger brother of Titus, destined hereafter to be the infamy of his race. He was still a child, and a stranger unable to read the mind's construction in the face would have pronounced that he was the best-looking of the five boys. For his cheeks wore a glow of health as ruddy as his brother's, and his features were far softer. But it was not a face to trust, and Britannicus, trained in a palace to recognize what was indicated by the expression of every countenance, never felt any liking for the sly younger son of Vespasian.

Vespasian was proud of his farm, and was far more at home there than in the reception-rooms of Nero. He was by no means ashamed of the humility of his origin. As he sat in his little villa, he used to tell people that his ancestor was only one of the Umbrian farmers, who, during the civil war between Marius and Sylla, had settled at Reate and married a Sabine maiden. Amazed indeed would those humble progenitors have been if they had been told that their great-grandson would be an Emperor of Rome! Nothing made him laugh more heartily than the attempt of his flatterers to deduce his genealogy from a companion of Hercules. He had not a single bust or waxen image of any illustrious ancestor to boast of, but was proud that the cities of Asia had reared a statue to his father, Sabinus, with the inscription, 'To the honest publican.'

He delighted to recall the memories of Cincinnatus and Fabricius and the old dictators, who had been taken from the plough-tail, and to whom their wives had to bring the single toga they possessed in order that they might meet the ambassadors of the Senate when they were summoned to subdue the enemies of Rome. He was never happier than when he took the boys round with him to visit his horses and his cows, and even Domitilla's hens. He delighted in the rude plenty of the house, the delicious cream, the fresh eggs, the crisp oat-cakes, the beautiful apples at breakfast, the kid and stewed fruits of the midday meal. Any one who watched those rustic meals would little have conjectured that, in that

low, unadorned room, with the watch-dogs slumbering before the hearth, they saw before them three emperors, two consuls and a princess. Still less would he have dreamed that one of them only would die peacefully in his bed; that, of those five boys, four would be the victims of murder, and one of martyrdom; and that the younger Domitilla, though she did not share her husband's matyrdom, would die in a bleak and lonely island as a confessor of the faith. Our life lies before us, and the mercy of Divine Providence hides its issues in pitchy night.

Vespasian alone of that little company was old enough to feel in all its fulness the blessing of a temporary escape from the horrible world of Rome, which tossed like a troubled sea whose waters cast up mire and dirt. He knew, as those lads could hardly know, that it was a world of insolence and passion, of treachery and intrigue, of ruthless cruelty and unfathomable corruption. He had seen the government of it pass from a madman like Caligula to a half-dazed blunderer like Claudius, and knew that the two had been preceded by a Tiberius, and succeeded by a Nero. One morning, when the weather did not permit them to go out to their usual outdoor sports, the boys had amused themselves with a genealogy of the Cæsars, in which they had become interested in consequence of some questions about the descendants of Augustus. As the blunt soldier looked at them while they bent over the genealogy, he became very thoughtful. For that stem of the Cæsars had something portentous in its characteristics. It was a grim reflex of the times. Here were emperors who had married five or six wives, and empresses who had married four or five husbands, and some of these marriages had been fruitful; and yet the Cæsars were hardly Cæsars at all, but a mixed breed of ancient Claudii, Domitii, Silani, and of modern Octavii and Agrippas. The genealogy showed a confused mass of divorces and adoptions, and neither the men nor the women of the royal house were safe. Many of the women were adulteresses; many of the men were murderers or murdered victims. Out of sixteen empresses, six had been killed and seven divorced. Julia, daughter of Augustus, after three marriages, had been banished by her father for shameless misconduct, and Tiberius had ordered her to be starved to death at Rhegium. Could Augustus have felt no

anguish in his proud spirit, when he had to write to a young patrician 'You have committed an indiscretion in going to visit my daughter at Baiæ'? or when on hearing that Phœbe, Julia's freedwoman, had hanged herself, he cried 'Would that I had been the father of that Phœbe'? And, alas! what multitudes of his descendants had equalled Julia alike in misery and shame! Death and infamy had rioted in that deplorable family. Well might Augustus exclaim, in the line of Homer:

'Would I had died unwed, nor been the father of children!'

When the people demanded the recall of the two Julias, after five or six years of exile, he exclaimed in a burst of indignation and anguish, 'I wish you similar wives and similar daughters.' He described his wife Scribonia, his daughter Julia, and his grandson Agrippa Postumus the younger as 'his three cancers.'[1]

But while the boys were eagerly talking together, and discussing those Cæsars, and members of their family, who from the time of Julius Cæsar downward had been deified, Vespasian suddenly grew afraid lest the same thought which struck him should strike them. In those days he did not dream that he too should wear the purple and die the apparent founder of a dynasty. He was not, indeed, unaware of various prognostics which were supposed to portend for him a splendid fate. At Phalacrine, his native hamlet, was an ancient oak sacred to Mars, which had put out a new branch at the birth of each of the three children of his father, Sabinus. The third, which represented himself, grew like a great tree. Sabinus, after consulting an augur, told his mother, Tertulla, that her grandson would become a Cæsar. But Vespasian shared the feelings of the old lady, who had only laughed immoderately at the prophecy, and remarked, 'How odd it is that I am in my senses, while my son has gone raving mad!'

Seeing that the boys were fascinated by the grandeur of Cæsarism, he rolled up the stemma. 'Do not be ambitious, lads,' he said. 'Could the name of *Imperator* or the sight of your radiated heads upon a coin, give you more happiness than you are enjoying here and now?'

[1] Note 23.—The *Stemma Cæsarum.*

The advice of Vespasian was perfectly sincere. In his homely way he saw too deeply into the heart of things to care for the outside veneer. It was his mother, Vespasia Polla — the daughter of the military tribune — who, led on by dreams and omens, had forced him into the career of civil honours. His brother obtained the right to wear the laticlave, or broad purple stripe on the toga, and the silver C on the boots, which marked the rank of senator. Vespasian was unwilling to lay aside the narrow stripe, the angusticlave, which showed him to be of equestrian rank. He only yielded to the pressure, and even to the abuse, of his mother, who asked him how long he meant to be the lacquey — the *anteambulo* — of his brother. He had nearly thrown up his public life in disgust, when during his ædileship Gaius had ordered the soldiers to cover him with mud, and to heap mud into the folds of his embroidered magisterial robe, because he found the roads insufficiently attended to. He had practised the advice he was now giving.

'My head has been struck on coins,' said Britannicus, with a sigh; 'but I can't say that it has made me much happier.'

'You are as happy as Nero is,' said Titus. 'I am quite sure that all the revels at Subiaco will not be worth the boar-hunt we mean to have to-morrow.'

'Clemens,' said Vespasian, 'Domitilla tells me that yesterday morning you were learning my favourite poem, the "Epode" of Horace about the pleasures of country life, and the lines of Virgil on the same subject. As we have nothing special to do this morning, suppose you repeat the poems to us, while the boys and I make a *formido* for our next deer-hunt.'

The boys got out the long line of string, and busied themselves with tying to it, at equal distances, the crimson feathers which were to frighten the deer into the nets; while Flavius, standing up, recited feelingly and musically the well-known lines of the Venusian poet, whose Sabine farm lay at no great distance from the place where they were living —

'Blessed is he — remote as were the mortals
Of the first age, from business and its cares —
Who ploughs paternal fields with his own oxen,
Free from the bonds of credit or of debt.
No soldier he, roused by the savage trumpet,
Not his to shudder at the angry sea;

His life escapes from the contentious Forum,
And shuns the insolent thresholds of the great.'[1]

And when, to the great delight of his uncle, he had finished repeating this poem, he repeated the still finer lines of Virgil, who pronounces 'Happy above human happiness the husbandmen for whom far beyond the shock of arms earth pours her plenteous sustenance.'[2]

The boys talked together on all sorts of subjects; only if Domitian was with them, they were instinctively careful about what they said. For Domitian could never forget that Britannicus was a prince. If Britannicus became Emperor he might be highly useful in many ways, and it was worth Domitian's while to insinuate himself into his favour. In this he soon saw that he would fail. The young prince disliked him, and could not entirely conceal his dislike under his habitual courtesy. Domitian then changed his tactics. He would try to be Nero's friend, and if he could find out anything to the disadvantage of Britannicus, so much the better. He had already attracted the notice of two courtiers — the dissolute Clodius Pollio, who had been a prætor, and the senator Nerva, both of whom stood well with the Emperor. Already this young reprobate had all the baseness of an informer. But in this direction also his little plans were defeated, for in his presence Britannicus was as reticent as to Titus he was unreserved.

Britannicus was to have had a room to himself, in consideration of his exalted rank, but he asked to share the sleeping-room of Titus and Clemens. They went to bed at an early hour, for Vespasian was still a poor man, and oil was expensive. But they often talked together before they fell asleep. Titus would rarely hear a word about the Christians. He declared that they were no better than the worshippers of the dog-headed Anubis, and he appealed to the caricature of the Domus Gelotiana as though it proved the reality of the aspersions against them. He was, however, never tired of talking about the Jews. He had seen Agrippa; he had been dazzled into a boyish love by the rich eastern beauty of Berenice. The dim foreshadowing of the future gave him an intense interest in the nation whose destiny he was to affect so powerfully in after years. Stories of the Jewish Temple seemed to

[1] Hor. *Epod.* ii. 1; Lord Lytton's version.
[2] Virg. *Georg.* ii. 458.

have a fascination for him. But he was as credulous about the Jews as the rest of his race, and believed the vague scandals that they were exiles from Crete, and a nation of lepers, and about Moses and the herd of asses — which afterwards found a place in Tacitus and later historians.

Another subject about which he liked to talk was Stoicism. He thought nothing so grand as the doctrine that the ideal wise man was the most supreme of kings. He was full of high arguments, learnt through Epictetus, to prove that the wise man would be happy even in the bull of Phalaris, and he quoted Lucretius and Virgil to prove that he would be always happy —

> 'If to know
> Causes of things, and far below
> His feet to feel the lurid flow
> Of terror, and insane distress,
> And headlong fate, be happiness.'

At all of which propositions Britannicus was inclined to laugh good-naturedly, and to ask — much to the indignation of his friend — if Musonius was happy when he had a bad tooth-ache.

Finding him unsympathetic on the subject of the Christians, Britannicus ceased to speak of them. On the other hand, he soon discovered that Clemens knew more about them than himself.

'Are you a Christian, Flavius?' asked Britannicus, when they were alone, after one of these conversations.

'I have not been baptised,' he answered. 'No one is regarded as a full Christian until he has been admitted into their church by baptism.'

'Baptism? What is that?

'It is the washing with pure water,' said Clemens. 'Our Roman ceremonies are pompous and cumbersome. It is not so with the Christians. Their symbols are the simplest things in the world. Water, the sign of purification from guilt; bread and wine, the common elements of life, taken in remembrance of Christ who died for them.'

'And are the elders of these Christians — the presbyters, as they call them — the same sort of persons as our priests?'

'I should hope not!' said Clemens. 'They are simple and blameless men — more like the best of the philosophers, and more consistent, though not so learned.'

The entrance of Domitian — whom they more than suspected of having listened at the door — stopped their conversation. But what Britannicus had heard filled him with deeper interest, and he felt convinced that the Christians were possessors of a secret more precious than any which Seneca or Musonius had ever taught.

But the happy days at the Sabine farm drew to an end. When November was waning to its close it was time to return from humble Phalacrine and its russet hills, to the smoke and wealth and roar of Rome.

CHAPTER XIX

OTHO'S SUPPER AND WHAT CAME OF IT

'Quoi cum sit viridissimo nupta flore puella
Et puella tenellulis delicatior hædis,
Asservanda nigellulis diligentius uvis,
Ludere hanc sinit, ut lubet.'

CATULL. *Carm.* xvii. 14.

WE left Onesimus bound hand and foot in his cell, and expecting the severest punishment. His crimes had been heinous, although the thought of escaping detection by slaying Junia had only been a momentary impulse, such as could never have flashed across his mind if it had not been inflamed by the furies of the amphitheatre. As he looked back in his deep misery, he saw how fatally all his misfortunes dated from the self-will with which he had resisted light and knowledge. He might by this time have been good and honoured in the house of Philemon, less a slave than a brother beloved. He might have been enfranchised, and in any case have enjoyed that happy freedom of soul which he had so often witnessed in those whom Christ had made free indeed. And now his place was among the lowest of the low. Nereus had of course reported to Pudens his attempt at theft. Pudens was sorry for the youth, for he had liked him, and saw in him the germs of better things. But such a crime could not be passed over with impunity. Onesimus was doomed to the scourge, as well as to a trinundine[1] of solitude on bread and water, while he remained fettered in his cell.

The imprisonment, the shame, the solitariness which was a cruel trial to one of his quick disposition, were very salutary to him. They checked him in a career which might have ended in speedy shipwreck. And while his heart was sore every kind influence was brought to bear upon him. Pudens

[1] A period of seventeen days.

visited him and tried to rouse him to penitence and manliness. Nereus awoke in his mind once more the dying embers of his old faith. Above all, Junia came one day to the door of his prison, and spoke a few words of courage and hope, which more than all else made him determined to struggle back to better ways.

His punishment ended, and he was forgiven. He resumed his duties, and took a fresh start, in the hope of better things.

Nero had returned to Rome, and drew still closer his bond of intimacy with Otho. Otho was his evil genius. In vain did Agrippina attempt to keep her son in the paths of outward conformity with the requirements of his position. In vain did Seneca and Burrus remind him of the responsibilities of an Emperor of Rome. Otho became his model, and Otho represented to one half of the Roman population the ideal which they themselves most desired and admired. All the voluptuous æstheticism, all the diseased craving in Nero's mind for the bizarre, the monstrous, and the impossible; all the '*opéra bouffe*' elements of his character, with its perverted instincts as of a tenth-rate artist, were strengthened and stimulated by his intercourse with Otho.

As a matter of course, the command of unlimited treasures followed the possession of an unchallenged autocracy. Though there was a theoretical distinction between the public exchequer and the privy purse, there was no real limit between the two. This 'deified gamin' had complete command of the resources of Italy and the provinces. Cost was never allowed to stand in the way of his grotesque extravagance. A boy was the lord of the world — *a bad boy* — who delighted in such monkey-tricks as taking his stand secretly on the summit of the proscenium in the theatre, setting the actors and pantomimes by the ears, and flinging missiles at people's heads.

Shortly after his return to Rome he gave a banquet, and the chief new feature of the entertainment was that the head of each guest had been sprinkled with precious perfumes. Otho determined that he would not be outdone. He was laden with debts; but what did that matter when he might look forward some day to exhausting some rich province with rapine? He asked Nero to sup with him, and determined that he would set the fashion to imperial magnificence.

The banqueters were nine in number: Otho and Nero;

Petronius, as the 'arbiter of elegance'; Tigellinus, as the most pliable of parasites; the actor Paris, because of his wit, grace, and beauty; Vatinius, as the most unspeakable of buffoons; Clodius Pollio, an ex-prætor, Pedanius Secundus, the Præfect of the city, and Octavius Sagitta, a tribune of the people, whom Nero liked for their dissolute manners.

Pricelessness and refinement — as refinement was understood by the most effeminate of Roman exquisites — were to be the characteristics of the feast. The dining-room was a model of the latest and most fashionable art. It was not large, but its roof was upheld by alternate columns of the rare marbles of Synnada and Carystus — the former with crimson streaks, the latter green-veined — while the two columns at the entrance showed the golden yellow of the quarries of Numidia, and the fretted roof was richly gilded and varied with arabesques of blue and crimson. The walls were inlaid with mother-of-pearl, alternated with slabs of ivory delicately flushed with rose-colour. The chandeliers were of antique shapes, and further light was given by candelabra of gold. In front of Nero was one of exquisite workmanship, which represented Silenus lying on a rock, with his head leaning against a tree which overshadowed it. The table was of cedar wood, supported by pillars of ivory, and it sparkled with goblets of gold and silver embossed by Mys and Mentor, among which were scattered amber cups, and chrysendeta which were of silver rimmed with gold. The bowls in which the rare wines were mixed were of pure crystal or the rubied glass of Alexandria. Although it was winter, garlands of exotic roses were provided for every guest, and these garlands were fastened to lappets of perfumed silk. None but the most youthful and beautiful of Otho's slaves — bright Greeks, and dark Egyptians, and fair-haired Germans, in sumptuous dresses, one or two of whom Otho had purchased for no less than eight hundred pounds — were permitted to wait upon the guests.

The supper was no supper of Trimalchio, with its coarse and heavy gluttonies. Everything was delicate and *recherché*. The oysters were from Richborough; the lampreys from the fishponds of a senator who was said to have flung into them more than one slave who had offended him; the mullet came from Tauromenos; the milk-cheeses from Sarsina; the fruits

seemed to have been produced in defiance of the seasons, and the roses were as plentiful as though it were midsummer. There were two tiny dishes which represented the last and most extravagant devices of Roman *gourmandise*, for one was composed of the tongues of nightingales, the other of the brains of Samian peacocks and African flamingoes, of which the iridescent and crimson feathers adorned the silver plates on which they lay. Sea and land had been swept with mad prodigality to furnish every luxury which money could procure. The wines were of the rarest vintages; and whereas four kinds of wine were thought an extravagance in the days of Julius Cæsar, Otho set eighty different sorts of wine before his guests, besides other kinds of delicate drinks. To relieve the plethora of luxuries the guests sometimes alternated hot burning mushrooms with pieces of ice.

But the most admired invention of extravagance was the one in which Otho had specially designed to outdo the luxury of Cæsar. The Romans were devoted to delicious odours. Nero had ordered perfumes to be sprinkled on the hair of his guests: but after this had been done to those who reclined at Otho's banquet, the boys who stood behind them took off their loose slippers and bathed their feet also in liquid essences — a device of which, up to this time, the luxury of an Apicius had never dreamed. And while the guests were still admiring this daring innovation, Otho made a sign with his jewelled hand to Polytimus, the chief favourite among his slaves, who immediately turned two taps of ivory and gold, and then, to the soft breathing of flutes, two fountains sprang into the air, from silver basins, and refreshed the banqueters with a fine dew of the most exquisite fragrance.

To those frivolous spirits all this unbridled materialism seemed to be the one thing which raised them nearest to the gods; and they felt a thrill of delight when it was whispered that for that single supper Otho had expended a sum of four million sesterces.[1]

The conversation during the meal was vapid and licentious. Beginning with the weather, it proceeded to discuss the gladiators, actors, dancers, and charioteers. Then it repeated all the most recent pasquinades and coarse jokes which had

[1] Note 24. — Otho's banquet.

been attached to the statues in the Forum. Then it turned to scandal, and

> 'Raged like a fire among the noblest names,
> Imputing and polluting,'

until it might have seemed that in all Rome not one man was honest, nor one woman pure. To say such things of many of the leading senators and patricians would have been not far from the truth; but the gossip became far more piquant when it dwelt on the immense usury of Seneca, and gave vent to the worst innuendoes about his private life; or when it tried to blacken with its poisonous breath the fair fame of a Pætus Thrasea or a Helvidius Priscus. Yet another resource was boundless adulation of the Emperor and abuse of every other authority, particularly of the Senate, of which Nero, like Gaius, was intensely jealous. It was on this occasion that Vatinius surpassed himself by the celebrated remark, 'I hate you, Cæsar, because you are a senator.' After a time, however, scandal and adulation palled, as did the smart procacity of the young slaves, who were trained to say witty and impudent things. And as by that time the drinking bout had begun, after the healths were finished the guests were amused by the strains of the choraulæ and the dances of Andalusian girls.

Among the amusements which Otho had provided was a ventriloquist, who took off all the chief lawyers of the day in a fashion first set by Mutus, in the reign of Tiberius. But the jaded, rose-crowned guests found that the evening was beginning to drag, and then they took to gambling. Nero caught the epidemic of extravagance, and that night he bet four hundred sesterces, not on each cast only, but on each *point* of the dice.

It was understood that, though the supper and its concomitant orgies were prolonged for hours, there was to be no deliberate drunkenness. Claudius had habitually indulged in a voracity which, on one occasion, had made him turn aside from his own judgment-seat to intrude himself as a guest at one of the celebrated banquets of the Salian priests, of which the appetising smell had reached him from the Temple of Mars. But by Otho and Petronius such forms of animalism were condemned as betraying a want of æsthetic breeding, and they sought to stimulate the lassitude of satiety by other

forms of indulgence. That night they proposed to initiate Nero into a new sensation, by persuading him to join the roysterers who, like the Mohawks in the reign of Queen Anne, went about the streets insulting sober citizens, breaking open shops, and doing all the damage and mischief in their power. It was this which made that evening memorable in Nero's reign, because it was the first instance of a folly which filled genuine Romans with anger and disdain.

But before we touch on these adventures, another incident must be mentioned, which produced a far deeper effect upon the annals of the world. It was on the evening of that supper that Nero first saw Poppæa Sabina.

Poppæa Sabina, though before her marriage to Otho she had been married to Rufius Crispinus, the Prætorian Præfect of Claudius, and had been the mother of a boy, still retained the youthful and enchanting loveliness which became an Empire's curse. She was a bride well suited in all respects to the effeminate and reckless Otho. If he paid priceless sums for the perruque which no one could distinguish from his natural hair, and used only the costliest silver mirrors, she equalled his absurdities by having her mules shod with gold, and by keeping five hundred she-asses to supply the milk in which she bathed her entire person, with the object of keeping her beautiful complexion in all its softness of hue and contour. And, when she travelled, the hot sunbeams were never allowed to embrown her cheeks, which she entirely covered with a fine and fragrant unguent.

Otho was sincerely attached to her. He was proud of possessing as his bride the haughtiest, the most sumptuous, and the most entrancingly fair of all the ladies in Rome. Before the death of Rufius Crispinus he had estranged her affections from her husband; and it was more than suspected that her object in accepting Otho had not only been her admiration for his luxurious prodigality, but also an ulterior design of casting her sorcery over the youthful Nero. Otho had often praised her beauty to the Emperor, for it was a boastfulness from which he could not refrain. But he did not wish that Nero should see her. He knew too well the inflammable disposition of the youthful Cæsar, and the soaring ambition of his own unscrupulous consort. In this purpose he had been abetted secretly by Agrippina, who felt an

instinctive dread of Poppæa, and who, if the day of her lawless exercise of power had not been ended within two months of her son's accession, would have made Poppæa undergo the fate which she had already inflicted on Lollia Paulina. By careful contrivance Otho had managed to keep Poppæa at a distance from Nero. The task was easier, because Nero was short-sighted, and Poppæa, either in affectation of modesty, or from thinking that it became her, adopted the fashion of Eastern women, in covering the lower part of her face with a veil when she went forth in public.

But that evening Nero, for the first time, saw her near at hand and face to face, and she had taken care that he should see her in the full lustre of her charms.

Beyond all doubt she was not only dazzlingly beautiful, but also possessed that spell of brilliant and mobile expression, and the consummate skill in swaying the minds of men, which in earlier days had enabled Cleopatra to kindle the love of Julius Cæsar, and to hold empery over the heart of Marcus Antonius. Her features were almost infantile in their winning piquancy, and wore an expression of the most engaging innocence. Her long and gleaming tresses, which almost the first among the ladies of Rome she sprinkled with gold, were not tortured and twisted into strange shapes, but parted in soft, natural waves over her forehead, and flowed with perfect grace over her white neck, setting off the exquisite shape of her head. She was dressed that evening in robes which made up for their apparent simplicity by their priceless value. They were of the most delicate colours and the most exquisite textures. The tunic was of that pale shining gold which the ancients described by the word 'hyaline'; the stola was of saffron colour. Her dress might have been described in terms like those which the poet applies to his sea-nymph —

> 'Her vesture showed the yellow samphire-pod,
> Her girdle the dove-coloured wave serene;'

and, indeed, the sea-nymph's robe had already been described by Ovid, speaking of the dress known as *undulata* —

> Hic, undas imitatus, habet quoque nomen ab undis,
> Crediderim nymphas hac ego veste tegi.'

She had divined the reasons which led Otho to prevent her from meeting the Emperor; but she was ambitious of a throne, and, while using neither look nor word which awoke suspicion in her husband's mind, she smiled to think how vain would be his attempt to set a man's clumsy diplomacy against a woman's ready wit.

'My Otho,' she had said to him, 'you are about to entertain the Emperor this evening at a supper such as Rome has not yet seen. The feast which Sestius Gallus gave to Tiberius, the supper which Agrippa the Elder gave to Gaius, and which helped him to a kingdom, were very well in their way; but they were vulgar and incomplete in comparison with that of which your guests will partake to-night.'

'I know it, Poppæa,' he said; 'and though my own taste sets the standard in Rome, I know how much the arrangements of my banquet will owe to the suggestions of my beautiful wife.'

'And ought not the wife, whom you are pleased to call beautiful, at least to welcome into the house our imperial guest? Will it not be a marked rudeness if the matron of the house has no word wherewith to greet the Cæsar as he steps across her threshold? Will he be content with the croaking "*Salve, Cæsar!*" of the parrot whom you have hung in his gilded cage at the entrance of the atrium?'

'Poppæa is lovely,' said Otho, 'and Nero is — what he is. Would you endanger the life of the last of the Salvii, merely for the pleasure of letting a short-sighted youth, perhaps a would-be lover, stare at you a little more closely?'

A pout settled on the delicate lips of Poppæa, as she turned away with the remark: 'I thought, Otho, that I had been to you too faithful a bride to find in you an unreasonable husband. Is there any lady in Rome except myself who would be deemed unworthy to see the Emperor when he sups in her house? Have I deserved that you should cast this slur upon me as though I — I, whose piety is known to all the Romans — were a Julia or an Agr— I mean, a Messalina?'

Otho tried to bring back her lips to their usual smile, but he did not wish to give way unless he were absolutely obliged to do so. He said:

'You must not adopt these tragic tones, my sweet Poppæa. This is but a bachelor's party. You shall meet Nero some

day in this house when all the noblest matrons of Rome are with you to sanction your presence, and you shall outshine them all. But there are guests coming to-night whom I should not care for Poppæa to greet, though I have asked them as companions of Nero. Surely you would not demean yourself by speaking to a Vatinius or a Paris, to say nothing of a Tigellinus or a Sagitta.'

'I need not see or speak to any of the others, Otho,' said Poppæa; 'but surely I have a right to ask that when the slave sees the gilded letica with its purple awnings I may for one moment advance across the hall, and tell Nero that Poppæa Sabina greets the friend of her lord, and thanks him for honouring their poor house with his august presence.'

'Well, Poppæa,' said Otho, 'if it must be so it must. You know that I can never resist your lightest petition, and I would rather give up the banquet altogether than see tears in those soft eyes, and that expression of displeasure against Otho on your lips.'

So, when Nero arrived, Poppæa met him, and, brief as was the interview, she had thrown into it all the sorcery of a potent enchantress. A sweet and subtle odour seemed to wrap her round in its seductive atmosphere, and every word and look and gesture, while it was meant to seem exquisitely simple, had been profoundly studied with a view to its effect. Poppæa was well aware that Nero was accustomed to effrontery, and that Acte had won his heart by her maidenly reserve. Nothing, therefore, could have been more sweetly modest than Poppæa's greeting. Only for one moment had she unveiled her whole face and let the light of her violet eyes flow through his soul. There was one observer who fully understood the pantomime. It was Paris, who read the real motives of Poppæa and was lost in admiration at so superb a specimen of acting. His knowledge of physiognomy, his insight into human nature, his mastery of his art, enabled him to see the truth which Nero did not even suspect, that this lovely lady with the infantile features was 'a fury with a Grace's mask.'

She saw that her glance had produced the whole effect which she had intended. Nero was amazed, and for the moment confused. He had never experienced such witchery as

this. Acte was modest and beautiful, but to compare Acte with Poppæa was to set a cygnet beside a swan. Poppæa vanished the moment her greeting had been delivered, but Nero stood silent. Almost the first word he said to his host struck like a death-knell on Otho's heart.

'Otho,' he said, 'how much luckier you are than I am! You have the loveliest and most charming wife in Rome; I have the coldest and least attractive.'

'Let not Cæsar disparage the sharer of his throne,' said Otho, concealing under measured phrases his deep alarm. 'The Empress Octavia is as beautiful as she is noble.'

But Nero could hardly arouse himself to admire and enjoy the best banquet of his reign, until he had called for his tablets, and written on them a message for Poppæa. 'I am thanking your lovely lady for her entertainment,' said the Emperor, as he handed his tablets to his freedman Doryphorus, and told him to take them to the lady of the house. But what he had really written was a request that Poppæa would deign to greet him for a moment during some pause in the long feast.

He made the requisite opportunity by saying that he would cool himself in the viridarium, and again he found Poppæa a miracle of reserve and sweetness. From that moment he determined, if it could in any way be compassed, to take her from her husband.

But this, as we have said, was not the only adventure of the evening. When the revel was over, the guests, instead of going home in pompous retinue attended by their slaves, determined to enjoy a frolic in the streets. 'Flown with insolence and wine,' they persuaded the Emperor to disguise himself in the dress of a simple burgher and to roam with them along the Velabrum and the Subura and every street in which they were likely to meet returning guests.

They all accompanied him except Vatinius, who was too weak and deformed to suit their purpose. The streets of Rome were dark at night. The expedient of public lamps, or even of lamps hung outside each house, had never occurred to a people that revelled in expensiveness. Hence it was dangerous for unprotected persons to go out at night, and the police had

more than they could really do. Nero and his companions were able, with perfect impunity, to insult, annoy and injure group after group of sober or peaceful citizens, whom the exigencies of duty or society had compelled to return to their homes after dark without a slave to bear a lantern or a torch. They enjoyed the novel sensation of terrifying timid women and of throwing harmless passengers into the gutters, indulging in every form of rowdyism which could furnish a moment's excitement.

The custom of 'tossing in a blanket' is not modern but ancient; only that among the ancients a large *sagum* or war-cloak was used, as our schoolboys use a blanket.[1] That night the party of aristocratic Mohawks caught several poor burghers, and amused themselves with terrifying them almost out of their wits by this boisterous amusement. It needed, however, a spice of cruelty to make it still more piquant; and when they had tossed one of their victims as high as they could they suddenly let go of the sagum, and suffered him to fall, bruised, and often stunned, to the ground, while they made good their escape.

But they were not allowed to have it all their own way. As they were near the Milvian Bridge it happened that Pudens met them. He was accompanied by Onesimus, who carried a lantern of bronze and horn, and by Nereus and Junia, who followed at a little distance. They had been, in considerable secrecy, to a Christian gathering, and were on their way homewards when they met these roving sons of Belial, two of whom also carried lanterns. The stalwart form of Pudens looked sufficiently formidable in the circle of dim light to prevent them from annoying him; but when they caught sight of the veiled figure of Junia they thought that her father Nereus, who was evidently only a slave, would be unable to protect her from their rude familiarities.

'Ha, maiden!' exclaimed Otho. 'What, veiled though it is night? Do you need protection from Cotytto? Come, bring me the lantern here; let us look at a face which will be presumably pretty.'

Junia shrank back, and Otho seized, and was attempting by force to uplift her veil when a blow from the oaken cudgel of Nereus benumbed his arm. But the Emperor, secure in the

[1] See Note 25.— Tossing in a blanket.

numbers of his companions, came up to the trembling slave-girl, who little dreamed whose was the hand laid upon her robe.

'Oh,' he said, 'when slave-girls are so modest there is nothing so effective for their education as the *sagatio*. What say you, comrades? It will be a novel excitement to toss a girl.'

'Brutes!' said Pudens, 'whoever you are — brutes and not Romans! Would you insult and injure a modest maiden, slave though she be? Stand back at your peril.'

But Nero, excited with wine, and closely followed by Pollio and Sagitta, was still endeavouring to drag away Junia, who clung convulsively to her father, when a blow from the strong hand of Pudens sent him staggering to the wall. He stumbled over a stone in the street, the mask slipped down from his face, and Pudens saw who it was. The sense of the peril in which he and his slaves were involved, at once flashed upon his mind. There was at least a chance that Nero had not recognised him in the darkness. He hastily whispered to Onesimus to put out his lantern and, if possible, those of their assailants also. The Phrygian rose to the occasion. Springing upon Petronius, he dashed the lantern out of his grasp by the suddenness of his assault, and, whirling his staff into the air, struck with all his force at the hand of Paris, who held the other lantern. The lights were extinguished by the fall of the lanterns, and covering his own under his tunic he called on Pudens and Nereus to follow him closely, and seized Junia by the hand. The by-ways of the streets had become familiar to him, and while the revellers were discomfited, and were absorbed in paying attention to Nero, whose face was bleeding, they all four made their escape, and got home by a more circuitous route.

'The bucket-men are coming, Emperor,' said Paris.

None of the party wanted the police to recognise them, or to have the trouble of an explanation which was sure to get talked of to their general discredit, and feeling a little crest-fallen, they all hurried off, to a secret entrance of the Palatine.

This was a rough beginning for Nero in his career of a practical joker. But the delights of such adventures were too keen to be foregone. He had not recognised Pudens, who took care not to look too closely at the bruise on Nero's cheek

when he went next morning to the Palace. In general he was safe in attacking small and feeble parties of citizens; but not long afterwards he received another rebuff from the senator Julius Montanus, whose wife he insulted as they were returning from supper at a friend's house. Montanus, like Pudens, had recognised the Emperor, but he had not the prudence to conceal his knowledge. Alarmed that he should have struck and wounded the sacrosanct person of a Cæsar, he was unwise enough to apologise. The consequence was natural. Had he held his tongue he might have escaped. Nero did not care to be detected in his escapades, and he ordered Montanus to commit suicide.

Having, however, been hurt more than once in these nocturnal encounters by men who had some courage, he made assurance doubly sure by taking with him some gladiators who were always to be within call if required. He was thus able to continue his pranks with impunity until they, too, lost their novelty, and began to pall upon a mind in which every spark of virility was dead, and which was rapidly degenerating into a mass of sensuous egotism.

CHAPTER XX

BROTHER AND SISTER

'Hopes have precarious life :
They are oft blighted, withered, snapped sheer off
In vigorous growth, and turned to rottenness ;
But faithfulness can feed on suffering
And knows no disappointment.'

GEORGE ELIOT.

FAR different was the way in which Britannicus had spent the memorable evening of Otho's supper.

He was thrown largely upon himself and his own resources. If Titus happened to be absent; if Epaphroditus did not chance to bring with him the quaint boy Epictetus; if the duties of Pudens summoned him elsewhere, he had few with whom he could converse in his own apartments. Sometimes Burrus visited him, and was kind; but he could hardly forgive Burrus for his share in Agrippina's plot. Seneca occasionally came to see him, and Seneca felt a genuine wish to alleviate the boy's unhappy lot. But Seneca had been Nero's supporter, and Britannicus could not quite get over the misgiving that his fine sentences were insincere. And at last an incident occurred which made it impossible for him ever to speak to Seneca without dislike. One day Nero had sent for his brother, and Britannicus, entering the Emperor's room before he came in, saw a copy or the *Ludus de morte Claudii Cæsaris* lying on the table. Naturally enough he had not heard of this ferocious satire upon his unhappy father. Attracted by the oddness of the title '*Apokolokyntosis*,' which the librarian had written on the outer case, he took up the book, and had read the first few columns when Nero entered. As he read, his soul burned with inexpressible indignation. His father had received a sumptuous Cæsarean funeral; he had been deified by the decree of the Senate; a

grand temple had been reared in his honour on the Cœlian hill; priests and priestesses had been appointed to worship his divinity. He knew very well that this might be regarded as a conventional officialism; but that the writer of this book should thus openly laugh in the face of Rome, her religion, and her Empire; that he should class Claudius with two miserable idiots like Augurinus and Baba; that he should brutally ridicule his absence of mind, his slavering lips, his ungainly aspect, and represent the Olympian deities in consultation as to whether he was a god, a human being, or a sea-monster — this seemed to him an act of shameless hypocrisy. He had seen how the Romans prostrated themselves in the dust before his father in his lifetime, as it were to lick his sandals; how Seneca himself had blazoned his earthly godship in paragraphs of sonorous eloquence. Yet here, on the table of his successor and adopted son, was a satire replete in every line with enormous slanders. And who could have written it? Britannicus could think of no one but Seneca; and all the more since the marks on the manuscript showed that Nero had read it, and read it with amused appreciation.

When Nero entered he found Britannicus standing by the table transfixed with anger. His cheeks were crimson with shame and indignation. Panting with wrath, he was unable even to return the greeting of Nero, who looked at him with astonishment till he saw the scroll from which he had been reading. Nero instantly snatched it out of his hand. He was vexed that the boy had seen it. It had not been intended for his eyes. But now that the mischief was done he thought it better to make light of it.

'Oh,' he said, 'I see that you have been reading that foolish satire. Don't be in such a state of mind about it. It is meant for a mere jest.'

'A jest!' exclaimed Britannicus, as soon as he found voice to speak. 'It is high treason against the religion of Rome, against the majesty of the Empire.'

'Nonsense!' said Nero, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'If I don't mind it, why should you? You are but a boy. Leave such matters to those who understand them, and know more of the world.'

'Why do you always treat me as a child?' asked Britannicus indignantly. 'I am nearly fifteen years old. 'I am

older than you were when my father allowed you to assume the manly toga.'[1]

'Yes,' said the Emperor; 'but there are differences. I am Nero, and you are — Britannicus. I shall not let you have the manly toga just yet; the golden bulla and the prætexta suit you a great deal better.'

Britannicus turned away to conceal the emotion which pride forbade him to show. He was about to leave the audience-room when Nero called him.

'Listen, Britannicus,' he said. 'Do not provoke me too far. Do not forget that I am Emperor. When Tiberius came to the throne there was a young prince named Agrippa Posthumus. When Gaius came to the throne there was a young prince named Tiberius Gemellus.'

'The Emperor Gaius adopted Tiberius Gemellus, and made him Prince of the Youth,' said Britannicus; 'you have never done that for me.'

'You interrupt me,' said Nero. 'Do you happen to remember what became of those two boys?'

Britannicus remembered only too well. Through the arts of Livia, Agrippa Posthumus, accused of a ferocious temperament, had been first banished to the Island Pandataria, then violently murdered. Tiberius Gemellus had not been murdered, because the news of such a death would have sounded ill; but he had had the sword placed against his heart, and had been taught to kill himself, so that his death might wear the semblance of suicide.

Nero left time for such recollections to pass through his brother's mind, and then he slowly added, 'And now that Nero has come to the throne, there happens to be a young prince named Britannicus.'

Britannicus shuddered. 'Do you menace me with murder?' he asked.

Nero only laughed. 'What need have I to menace?' he asked. 'Do you not know that I have but to lift a finger, if it so pleases me, and you die? But don't be alarmed. It does not please me — at present.'

Britannicus turned very pale. He knew that Nero's words conveyed no idle boast. He was but a down-trodden boy —

[1] Note 26. — Age of Britannicus.

the orphan son of a murdered mother; of a father foully dealt with, infamously calumniated. What cared the Roman world whether he perished or not, or how he perished? He choked down the sob which rose, and left his brother's presence in silence; but, as he traversed the long corridor to the room of Octavia, he could not help asking himself, with dread forebodings, what would be his fate? Would he be starved, like the younger Drusus? or poisoned, like the elder? or bidden to end his own life, like poor young Tiberius Gemellus? or assassinated by violence, like Agrippa Posthumus? How was he better than they? And if he perished, who would care to avenge him? But, oh God! if there were such a God as He in whom the Christians believed, what a world was this into which he had been plunged! What sin had he or his ancestors committed, that these hell-dogs of wrong and murder banned his steps from birth? The old Romans had been strong and noble and simple. Even in the days of Augustus they could thrill to the lesson of Virgil:

> 'Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento;
> Hæ tibi erunt artes, pacisque imponere morem,
> Parcere subjectis, et debellare superbos.'

Whence the present dearth of all nobleness? What creeping paralysis of immoral apathy had stricken this corrupt and servile aristocracy, this nerveless and obsequious Senate? From what black pit of Acheron had surged up the slime of universal corruption which polluted every class around him with ignoble debaucheries? He saw on every side of him a remorseless egotism, an unutterable sadness, the fatalism of infidelity and despair. A poisoning of the blood with physical and moral madness seemed to have become the heritage of the ruling Cæsars. Where could he look for relief? Men had ceased to believe in the gods. The Stoics had nothing better to offer than hard theories and the possibility of suicide — and what a thing must life be if it had no more precious privilege than the means of its own agonising and violent suppression!

Britannicus was intelligent beyond his years, and thoughts like these chased each other through his mind as he made his way with slow and painful steps to the rooms of his sister. For an instant the thought of a rebellion flashed across his mind, but it was at once rejected. What could he do? He was

but a friendless boy. He felt as if he had heard the sentence of early death; as if his innocence were nothing to such gods as those whom his childhood had been taught to name; as if the burden of an intolerable world were altogether too heavy for him to understand or to bear. And yet he was not unsupported by some vague hope in the dim, half-explored regions of that new gospel of which he now had heard.

To Octavia the visits of her brother were almost the only happiness left. As he entered she dismissed the slaves, for she saw at a glance that some profound emotion had swept over his mind, and longed to give him consolation.

In their forlornness the brother and sister always tried to spare each other any needless pang. Octavia had never hinted to Britannicus that Nero's base hand had often been lifted to strike her. She did not tell him that on that morning he had seized her by the hair, and in the frenzy of his rage had almost strangled her. Nor would he tell her about the infamous attack on their father's memory which he had seen on Nero's table. He little dreamt that she knew of it already, nay, even that, with coarse malice, Nero had shown it to her, and read passages aloud in her tortured hearing on purpose to humiliate and trouble her. Still less would he reveal the threat which seemed to give fresh significance to the feline gleam which he had caught a few days before in the eyes of the horrible Locusta.

Yet by secret intuition each of them divined something of what was in the heart of the other.

When Britannicus entered he found his sister gazing with a sad smile at a gold coin of the island of Teos, which lay on the palm of her hand.

'What amuses you in that coin?' he asked.

'Look at it,' she said, pointing to the inscription *Θεὰν Ὀκταβίαν* — 'the *goddess* Octavia.'[1] 'I was thinking, Britannicus, that if the other goddesses are as little happy as I am, I should prefer to be a mortal!'

Her brother smiled too, but remained silent. He dreaded to deepen her sorrow.

'Have you nothing to tell me, Britannicus?' she asked. 'What is it which makes you so much sadder than your wont?'

'Nothing that I *can* tell you,' he answered. 'But oh, Octa-

[1] A coin of Teos with this inscription is still extant.— Mionnet, iv. 123.

via, what thoughts strike you when you look round upon this Palace and society? Is there no such thing as virtue?' he asked impetuously. 'The Romans used to honour it. Who cares for virtue now, except one or two philosophers? and —'

'Speak on, Britannicus,' she said. 'Agrippina is less our enemy than she was. She has withdrawn her spies. We are not worth the hatred of any one else. Of the slaves who chiefly wait on me, most are faithful, and some are Christians.'

'You have guessed my meaning, Octavia. Of the men and women around us, how very few there are, except the Christians, who are pure and good. How comes it?'

'Their strange faith sustains them.'

'But does it not seem inconceivable that the gods — or that God, if there be but one, should have revealed the truth to barbarian Jews?'

'I don't know, Britannicus. Who is the most virtuous person you know — I mean, excepting the Christians?'

'Have we met any — except perhaps Persius and my Titus? and — well, perhaps the most virtuous of all is that little slave, Epictetus.'

'Yet Epictetus is a Phrygian, and a slave, and deformed, and lame. And as for the Jews, you know that your friend Titus thinks them the most interesting people in the world; and it is whispered that some of the noblest ladies in Rome — Otho's wife among them — have secretly embraced Judaism.'

'Poppæa does little credit to their religion if all be true that is said of her. But Pomponia is a Christian, and Claudia, the fairest maiden in Rome. Whether they hold truth or falsehood I know not, but if religion has anything to do with goodness there seems to be no religion like theirs.'

'Britannicus,' she answered, 'like you, I am deeply interested in all that Pomponia has told me; but I will tell you what has struck me most. Nero, and Seneca, and Agrippina, and all the rest of them, are full of misery and despair, though they are rich, and praised, and powerful; but these Christians, on the other hand, are paupers, hated, persecuted — and yet happy. It is that which amazes me most of all.'

Britannicus sighed. 'Octavia,' he said, 'I would gladly know more of this foreign superstition, which makes men good amid wickedness, and joyful amid afflictions; which makes women like Pomponia, and girls like Claudia, and boys like Flavius Clemens.'

'Let us, then, sup to-night with Pomponia,' said Octavia. 'She knows that I am lonely, and she has told me that her old general and herself will always delight to see us, if I will come without state and share their simplicity. Nero sups to-night with Otho. No one will prevent us from going together to the house of one whose loyalty is so little suspected as that of Aulus Plautius.'

And thus it was that while Nero revelled, and drank, and made the streets of his capital unsafe with riot and assault, Britannicus was present at the first Christian assembly which he had ever witnessed.

CHAPTER XXI

AMONG THE CHRISTIANS

Αὐτίκα οἱ εἰς Χριστὸν πεπιστευκότες χρηστοί τέ εἰσι καὶ λέγονται. — Clem. Alex. *Strom.* ii. 4.

Aulus Plautius, without any pretence to be a philosopher or a republican, prided himself on retaining the antique fashion of Roman simplicity. His house was in every way a contrast to that of Otho. It excited the laughter of the dandies of the new school, with its old rude statuary, its hard couches, its plain tables, its floor of simple black and white marble, the limited number of faithful and sober slaves, among whom but few were Greeks, and not one resembled the pampered pages who were the pride of more modern establishments. The whole service of the house was modest and yet stately; and the conqueror of Britain, so far from blushing at the moderate fortune and Roman surroundings which showed that he at least had not plundered the provinces which he had governed, was, on the contrary, pleased that men should see this example of honesty and justice.

Pudens was in command of the escort of the Empress; and it was on his return from the Palace to his own house that the rencontre with Nero occurred which has been already narrated. Caractacus, too, and Claudia were present, though the guests were few; and young Flavius Clemens had been invited to meet the children of Claudius. After the modest supper was over, the Empress and her brother enjoyed a conversation with their noble hostess, and learnt from her that in one of the outer offices of the house of Plautius the Christian assembly was that night to be held. It would have been too dangerous for Octavia to be present, but Pomponia had many Christian slaves and some freedmen who shared her secret, and were men and women of

unquestioned fidelity. Britannicus had now heard from her a great deal about the elementary doctrines of the new faith. There seemed to be no reason why she should any longer refuse his desire to be an eye-witness of Christian worship. She had spoken on the subject to Linus, the bishop of the Gentile community; and, without revealing any name, had told him that a young stranger, for whom she could vouch as one who would not be guilty of any treachery, would be entrusted with the watchword, and would be present at the evening prayers. Flavius Clemens was also to be present as a companion to Britannicus. Pomponia's own son, a bright boy, named Aulus Plautius after his father, had not yet been taught any of the truths of Christianity. His mother had trained him in all high and noble things; but the general, who knew that she had 'taken up unusual religious views,' had laid on her his injunctions not to teach them without his permission to their son.

So retired had been the life of the young prince, and so intentional the seclusion in which he had been brought up, that few knew him by sight. But to prevent the danger of his being recognised by any chance informer, Pomponia so altered his appearance that even Octavia might have failed to recognise him. The Flavian boy was at that time a person of little or no importance, and it was not necessary that he should be disguised. Pomponius, who stayed with the Empress, entrusted Britannicus to the charge of Pudens, who, though not yet baptised, was now a recognised catechumen. He had been at Christian gatherings before, and was all the more glad to go this evening, because Claudia also was to be present, in whom the soul of the centurion was more and more bound up. But to avoid all possibility of suspicion he placed his faithful Nereus in charge of the young stranger, while he himself stood a little apart, and watched.

The heart of the noble boy beat fast as he entered that unwonted scene. The room in which the Christians met was a large granary in which Plautius stored the corn which came from his Sicilian estates. It was as well lighted as circumstances admitted, but chiefly by the torches and lanterns of those who had come from all parts of the city to be present at this winter evening assembly.

Britannicus was astonished at their numbers. He was quite unaware that a religion so strange — a religion of yesterday, whose founder had perished in Palestine little more than twenty years before — already numbered such a multitude of adherents in the imperial city. Clemens whispered to him that this was but one congregation, and represented only a fraction of the entire number of believers in Rome, who formed a multitude which no single room could have accommodated. He told him, further, that though the Jewish and the Roman — or, as they call them, the Gentile — converts formed a common brotherhood, only separated from each other by a few national observances, they usually worshipped at Rome in separate communities.

If Britannicus was surprised by the numbers of the Christians, he was still more surprised by their countenances. The majority were slaves, whose native home was Greece or Asia. Their faces bore the stamp which had been fixed on them by years of toil and hardship; but even on the worn features of the aged there was something of the splendour and surprise of the divine secret. The young prince saw that they were in possession of something more divine than the world could understand. For the first time he beheld not one or two only, but a blessed company of faithful people who had felt the peace of God which passeth all understanding.

The children also filled him with admiration. He had seen lovely slaves in multitudes; there were throngs of them in the Palace and in the houses of men like Otho and Petronius. But their beauty was the beauty of the flesh alone. How little did it resemble the sweet and sacred innocence which brightened the eyes of these boys and girls who had been brought up in the shelter of Christian homes!

But he was struck most of all with the youths. How many Roman youths had he seen who had been trained in wealthy households, in whom had been fostered from childhood every evil impulse of pride and passion! He daily saw the young men who were the special favourites of his brother Nero. Many of them had inherited the haughty beauty of patrician generations; but luxury and wine had left their marks upon them, and if they had been set side by side with these, whose features glowed with health and purity and self-control, how would the pallid faces of those dandies have looked like a

fulfilment of the forebodings which even Horace had expressed!

Nothing could have been more simple than the order of worship. The Christians had ended the Agape, the common meal of brotherly love, consisting of bread and fish and wine. They had exchanged the kiss of peace. The tables had now been removed by the young and smiling acolytes, and the seats arranged in front of the low wooden desk at which Linus and the elders and deacons stood. They had no distinctive dress, but wore the ordinary tunic or cloak of daily life, though evidently the best and neatest that they could procure. In such a community, so poor, so despised, there could be no pomp of ritual, but the lack of it was more than compensated by the reverent demeanour which made each Christian feel that, for the time being, this poor granary was the house of God and the gate of heaven. They knelt or stood in prayer as though the mud floor were sacred as the rocks of Sinai, and every look and gesture was happy as of those who felt that not only angels and archangels were among them, but the invisible presence of their Lord Himself.

First they prayed; — and Britannicus had never before heard real prayers. But here were men and women, the young and the old, to whom prayer evidently meant direct communion with the Infinite and the Unseen; to whom the solitude of private supplication, and the community of worship, were alike admissions into the audience-chamber of the Divine. Never had he heard such outpourings of the soul, in all the rapture of trust, to a Heavenly Father. How different seemed such intercourse with the Eternal from the vague conventional aspirations of the Stoics towards an incomprehensible Soul of the Universe, which had no heart for pity and no arm to save!

But a new and yet more powerful sensation was kindled in his mind, when at the close of the prayers they sang a hymn. It was a hymn to Christ, beginning —

> 'Faithful the saying,
> Great the mystery — Christ!
> Manifested in the flesh,
> Justified in the spirit;
> Seen of angels;
> Preached among the nations;
> Believed on in the world;
> Received up in glory!'

Britannicus listened entranced to the mingled voices as they rose and fell in exquisite cadence. He had heard in theatres all the most famous singers of Rome; he had heard the chosen youths and the maidens chanting in the temple processions; he had heard the wailing over the dead, and the Thalassio-chorus of the bridal song. But he had heard nothing which distantly resembled this melody and harmony of voices wedded to holy thoughts; and, although there were no instruments, the 'angelical soft trembling voices' seemed to him like echoes from some new and purer region of existence. He rejoiced, therefore, when they began yet another hymn, of which the first verse was —

'Awake thee, O thou sleeper,
And from the dead arise,
And Christ shall dawn upon thee,
To light thy slumbering eyes.' [1]

When the hymn was over they sat down, and Linus rose to speak to them a few words of exhortation. He reminded them that they had been called from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. He told them that they had fled to the rock of Christ amid a weltering sea of human wickedness, and though the darkness was around them he bade them to walk in the light, since they were the children of light. Many of them had lived of old in the vices and sins of heathendom, but they were washed, they were justified, they were sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of their God. Were not their bodies temples of the Holy Ghost which dwelt in them, except they were reprobates? Since, then, they were in the Spirit, let them bring forth the fruits of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, charity — against which there was no law. The world was passing away and the fashion of it; their own lives were but as the withering grass and the fading flower; and was not the day of the Lord at hand? Would He not speedily return to judge His people? Would not that day come as a thief in the night, and how should they stand its probatory fire unless they were safe in the love of their Redeeming Lord?

So far had he proceeded when a mighty answering 'MARANATHA' of the deeply-moved assembly smote the air, and

[1] Eph. v. 14 (apparently the fragment of a hymn).

immediately afterwards Britannicus stood transfixed and thrilled to the very depths of his whole being.

For now a voice such as he had never heard — a sound unearthly and unaccountable — seemed not only to strike his ears but to grasp his very heart. It was awful in its range, its tone, its modulations, its startling, penetrating, appalling power; and although he was unable to understand its utterance, it seemed to convey the loftiest eloquence of religious transport, thrilling with rapture and conviction. And, in a moment or two, other voices joined it. The words they spoke were exalted, intense, impassioned, full of mystic significance. They did not speak in their ordinary familiar tongue, but in what seemed to be as it were the essence and idea of all languages, though none could tell whether it was Hebrew, or Greek, or Latin, or Persian. It resembled now one and now the other, as some overpowering and unconscious impulse of the moment might direct. The burden of the thoughts of the speakers seemed to be the ejaculation of ecstasy, of amazement, of thanksgiving, of supplication, of passionate dithyramb or psalm. They spoke not to each other, or to the congregation, but seemed to be addressing their inspired soliloquy to God. And among these strange sounds of many voices, all raised in sweet accord of entranced devotion, there were some which no one could rightly interpret. The other voices seemed to interpret themselves. They needed no translation into significant language, but spontaneously awoke in the hearts of the hearers the echo of the impulse from which they sprang. There were others which rang on the air more sharply, more tumultuously, like the clang of a cymbal or the booming of hollow brass, and they conveyed no meaning to any but the speakers, who, in producing these barbarous tones, felt carried out of themselves. But there was no disorderly tumult in the various voices. They were reverberations of one and the same supernatural ecstasy — echoes awakened in different consciousnesses by one and the same intense emotion.

Britannicus had heard the Glossolalia — the gift of the tongue. He had been a witness of the Pentecostal marvel, a phenomenon which heathendom had never known.

Nor had he only heard it, or witnessed it. For as the voices began to grow fainter, as the whole assembly sat listening in the hush of awful expectation, the young prince himself felt

as if a spirit passed before him, and the hair of his flesh stood up; he felt as if a Power and a Presence stronger than his own dominated his being; annihilated his inmost self; dealt with him as a player does who sweeps the strings of an instrument into concord or discord at his will. He felt ashamed of the impulse; he felt terrified by it; but it breathed all over and around and through him, like the mighty wind; it filled his soul as with ethereal fire; it seemed to inspire, to uplift, to dilate his very soul; and finally it swept him onward as with numberless rushings of congregated wings. The passion within him was burning into irresistible utterance, and, in another moment, through that humble throng of Christians would have rung in impassioned music the young voice of the last of the Claudii pouring forth things unutterable, had not the struggle ended by his uttering one cry, and then sinking into a faint. Before that unwonted cry from the voice of a boy the assembly sank into silence, and after two or three moments the impulse left him. Panting, unconscious, not knowing where he was, or whether he had spoken or not, or how to explain or account for the heart-shaking inspiration which had seemed to carry him out of himself beyond all mountain barriers and over unfathomable seas, the boy sank back into the arms of Pudens, who, alarmed and amazed and half ashamed, had sprung forward to catch him as he fell.

As he seemed to be in a swoon, one of the young acolytes came to him, and gently bathed his face with cold water. And meanwhile as the hour was late, and they all had to get home in safety through the dark streets and lanes through which they had come — some of them from considerable distances — Linus rose, and with uplifted hand dismissed the congregation with the words of blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Pudens and Nereus carried back the still half-unconscious boy into the house of Pomponia, where his sister awaited him. Octavia was alarmed at the wildness of his look, but the fresh air had already revived him. 'I am quite well,' he said, as the Empress bent anxiously over him, 'but I am tired, and should like to be silent. Let us go home, Octavia.'

'The escort is waiting,' said Pudens.

So they bade farewell to Pomponia, and the soldiers saw them safely to the Palace.

When they had started, Claudia said: 'Oh, Pomponia, while he was at the gathering the Power came upon him; he seemed scarcely able to resist it; but for his fainting I believe that he would have spoken with the tongue!'

Pomponia clasped her hands, and bowed her head in silent prayer.

CHAPTER XXII

BRITANNICUS AND HIS SONG

'Even then
The princely blood flows in his cheek, he sweats,
Strains his young nerves, and puts himself in posture.'
SHAKESPEARE, *Cymbeline*, iii. 3.

NERO was chary of showing his bruised face. He daily smeared it with the juice of an herb called *thapsia* from the island of Thapsos where it was found, and with a mixture of wax and frankincense, but it retained for some days the marks of the buffet which he had received from the arm of Pudens. From Octavia he did not care to conceal either that or any other disgrace. He had reduced his unhappy girl-bride to such a condition that she dared ask him no question. From Agrippina he would gladly have concealed it, but he had been unable as yet to break the habit of paying her a daily visit. Intensely miserable was that visit to them both, and, except when Nero chose to bring his friends and attendants with him, the salutations often ended with the stormiest scenes.

They did on this occasion.

The Augusta at once noticed the bruise on Nero's cheek, and she was perfectly aware of the cause of it; for she had not sunk so completely out of the old habits of power as not to have spies in her pay who kept her well informed of the Emperor's proceedings.

Supremely wretched, but even in her wretchedness agitated by the furies of pride and passion, she had scarcely received his cold kiss when she began to taunt her son.

'Cæsar looks gallantly to-day,' she said; 'for all the world like some clumsy gladiator who has been hit while practising with wooden foils.'

Nero maintained a sulky silence.

She added: 'No doubt it is as worthy of a Roman Emperor to roam about at night and join in street brawls with slaves as it is for him to sing, and write verses, and dance on the stage.'

'How do you know that I have roamed the streets?'

Unwittingly she had betrayed herself, but in an instant she recovered from her confusion.

'What Otho and your other boon companions do — such as they are — is notorious; and when Cæsar has a black eye the event is hard to account for in any ordinary way.'

'Say rather that your spies have told you about it,' said Nero.

'And if they have,' she said defiantly — 'what then?'

'Why this,' he answered; 'that, as I have told you before, I am Emperor, and mean to be Emperor; and if you do not choose to be taught it by fair means, by all the gods, you shall be taught it by foul.'

'By all the gods?' said Agrippina, repeating his oath. 'Are you not afraid of their wrath?'

Nero smiled a peculiar smile. 'Not at all,' he said. 'Why should I fear gods when I can make them myself?'[1]

Agrippina was stung by the sense of her impotence, and maddened by the shipwreck of her ambition; but she was too proud and fierce to abandon the contest.

'If you do not fear any gods,' she said, 'you shall fear me. Britannicus has nearly arrived at the age of manhood. He is the son of Claudius; you are not. But for me he would have been Emperor; by my aid he may yet sit upon his father's throne. Then once more Rome shall see a man ruling her, and not a singer and a dandy.'

Nero, filled with fury, clenched his fist, and strode forward as though he would strike her.

She sprang up with flashing eyes. 'Would you dare to strike me?' she shrieked. 'By heavens, if you did, I would that moment stab you to the heart.'

At the word she drew from her robe a dagger which she always carried there, and raised it in her right hand, while her bosom heaved with passion.

Nero sprang back, but Agrippina, as though in the revulsion of disdain, dropped the dagger at her feet.

[1] Note 27. — Making gods.

'You would make a fine tragedian, mother,' said Nero, with a bitter sneer.

The excess of Agrippina's rage seemed to stifle her. 'One hope, at least, the gods have left me,' she gasped forth, as soon as she could find voice to speak. 'Britannicus yet lives; I will take him with me to the Prætorian camp. I will see whether the soldiers will listen to the daughter of Germanicus, or to Burrus with his mutilated hand and Seneca with his professorial tongue.'

'I am tired of all this,' answered Nero. 'Only remember that some day you may provoke me too far. There are such persons as informers; there is such a law as that of *læsa majestas*.'

He left her, as he almost always left her now, in angry displeasure, but he did not seriously fear her threats. He had been trained to think himself incomparably superior to Britannicus. Agrippina herself had encouraged the widespread scandal that it was one thing to be a son of Messalina, and quite another to be a son of Claudius. Besides, he traced no steady ambition in the boy. So long as he was left to amuse himself with Titus, he gave hardly any trouble, nor had he, so far as Nero knew, a single partisan who could for a moment withstand the combined authority and popularity of such men as Seneca and the Prætorian Præfect. Still he disliked being threatened so constantly with the claims of the son of Claudius. Tigellinus was always hissing his name in his ears, and Agrippina blazoning him as a resource wherewith to secure her vengeance. If Britannicus were not so insignificant, it might be well to put him out of the way.

A few days afterwards, when his face had nearly resumed its ordinary hue, he determined to celebrate the Saturnalia with a party mainly composed of youthful nobles.

Otho of course was there, and the guests whom he had invited to the villa in the Apennines. Among the others were Nerva, now a young man of twenty-three, and Vespasian, with his two sons, Titus and Domitian, who, with a few other boys, were asked to meet Britannicus. Piso Licinianus, a youth of seventeen, of high lineage and blameless manners, was of a very different stamp from Nero's favourite companions, but Nero chose to pay him the com-

pliment of commanding his presence. Among the elder guests of the miscellaneous party were invited Galba, a man in the prime of life, who since his return from Africa had been living in retirement, and Vitellius, who, though only forty, had been already infamous under four emperors, and who rose to the highest position in spite of the fact that he was notorious for gluttony alone.

A curious incident occurred at the beginning of the banquet. Among the crowded slaves who waited on the guests was a Christian who, like Agabus and the daughters of Philip, possessed in a high degree that peculiar gift of prophecy which is known as second sight. His name was Herodion; and Apelles, one of his fellow-slaves in Cæsar's household, in pointing out the guests, mentioned the rumour that Nerva's horoscope had been cast by an astrologer, who had predicted that he should succeed to the Empire; and that Augustus had laid his hands on the head of Galba when he was a boy, and had said to him, 'Thou too, my child, shalt have a taste of empire.'

'I do not believe in horoscopes,' said Herodion.

'Not believe in the Chaldæans?' replied the other. 'Ah, I remember, thou art one of those Christians, who worship — well, never mind. But canst thou deny that the prognostications of our augurs, and the answers of our oracles, often come true?'

'They do,' said Herodion. 'We believe that the demons have such power sometimes permitted them. There was, for instance, a maid with the spirit of Python at Philippi, whose fame has even reached to Rome. But —' and here he paused long, and gazed with earnest and troubled countenance on the assembled guests.

'What is it?' asked Apelles.

'Apelles,' answered Herodion, 'thou art honest, and lovest me. Dare I tell thee that as I gaze on these guests I seem to see them as through a mist of blood?'

'Thou art safe with me,' answered Apelles. 'Should I be likely to betray the kind sharer of my cell, who nursed me last year through that long and terrible fever?'

But Herodion sank into silence, though his glance grew more and more troubled as he looked around him. Whatever it may have been granted him to see or to divine, he spoke no

more. But among those guests there were no less than eight future emperors — Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Nerva, and Trajan, then a little child, who was led in by a slave; and five of these, as well as Nero and Britannicus, and Piso Licinianus, were destined to violent deaths. Apelles recalled the scene years afterwards, when he too had become a convert to Christianity.

The joyous licence of the Saturnalia put an end to all stiffness of ceremonial. The banquet was gay and mirthful, and as so many youths and boys were present the amusements were purposely kept free from such scenes as disgraced the suppers at Subiaco and the palace of Otho. It was agreed that the younger guests should cast lots which should be the king of the feast. Nero threw the Venus-throw of four sixes, and was accordingly elected with acclamation to the mirthful office. The *rex* ruled with undisputed sway, and all were obliged to obey his bidding. Good taste and natural kindness usually prevented him from any flagrant abuse of his office.

While the staid elders looked on with smiles, Nero and the younger part of the company amused themselves with various games.

'And now,' said the Emperor, 'you must all obey your symposiarch, and I am going to tell you each in turn what to do.'

Otho was bidden to take off his garland, and place it on the head of the person whom he loved best; and of course he placed it on the head of Nero.

Lucan, as he was fond of stories, was bidden to tell a complete story in one minute; and with surprising readiness he quoted the two Greek lines —

> 'A, finding some gold, left a rope on the ground;
> B, missing his gold, used the rope which he found.'[1]

'Piso Licinianus, you are to pay me the highest compliment you can.'

Piso was no flatterer, and did not like the command, but after a moment's hesitation he quoted Horace's lines —

> 'How great thy debt to Nero's race,
> O Rome, let red Metaurus say,
> Slain Hasdrubal, and Victory's grace,
> First granted on that glorious day.'

[1] Note 28. — Greek epigram.

'That is a compliment to my ancestors, not to me,' said Nero; 'but I will let you off, for, though I am Rex, I am not Tyrannus.'

'Now, Petronius, you are a poet, so I am going to give you a hard command. I will give you five minutes, and you are to produce a line which shall read the same backwards and forwards.'

'Impossible, Cæsar,' said Petronius.

'Nevertheless, I require the impossibility, or you will have to drink by way of fine at least nine cyathi of neat Falernian.'

With humble apologies, Petronius seized his tablets, and before the five minutes had expired he read the line —

'Roma tibi subito motibus ibit Amor.'

'Your line is not Latin, and does not make sense,' said Nero. 'I should have told you to make me a compliment instead of our grave Licinianus. But now, Senecio, I order you to quote the epitaph which best expresses your view of life.'

Senecio obeyed, and his selection was very characteristic. It was —

'Eat, drink, enjoy thyself: the rest is nothing.' [1]

'What would our small Epictetus say to that?' whispered Titus in the ear of Britannicus.

Other guests achieved the tasks appointed them with more or less success, and they awaited with some curiosity the injunction which Nero would lay on Britannicus. Britannicus did not feel much anxiety about it, for he supposed it would be of the same playful and frivolous character as the rest. He did not imagine that his brother would single him out at a genial gathering to put upon him a public insult by ordering him to do anything which would cause a blush. He was therefore struck with amazement when Nero said:

'And now, Britannicus, get up, walk into the middle of the room, and there sing us a song.'

A low and scarcely audible murmur of disapproval ran round the room. As it was the Saturnalitian festival, the

[1] Note 29. — Epitaph.

slaves were not only present as spectators of these social games, but were allowed by custom to indulge in an almost unlimited licence of satire even against their masters. But that a prince of the blood should be called upon to sing — to sing in public, before a number of noble Romans, and even in the presence of slaves, was regarded as an indignity of the deadliest description. It was a violation of immemorial custom. It was a demand entirely outrageous. The hot blood rushed to the cheeks of Britannicus, and suffused his brow and neck. An indignant refusal sprang to his lips. If Pudens had been near he would at least have glanced at him to see what he would advise; but, to his deep grief, Pudens had been removed to a post in the camp, and his place had been taken by a tribune named Julius Pollio, whom Britannicus distrusted at a glance. The pause was becoming seriously awkward, and many of the guests betrayed uneasiness, when Britannicus heard Titus, who sat next to him, whisper in a low voice, 'It is a shame; but you had better try, for fear worse should happen.'

Then Britannicus summoned up all his courage and all his dignity. He rose and walked with a firm step into the middle of the triclinium, asked the harpist Terpnos, whom he saw standing near with his harp in his hand, to give him a note, and in a voice sweet and clear began to sing one of the finest choruses from the 'Andromache' of the old Roman poet, Ennius. It described the ruin of the House of Priam. 'I have seen,' says Andromache, the captive wife of Hector, 'the palace with its roof embossed and fretted with gold and ivory, and all its lofty portals, wrapped in conflagration. I have seen Priam slain with violence, and the altar of Jove incarnadined with blood. What protection shall I seek? Whither shall I fly? What shall be my place of exile? Robbed of citadel and city, whither shall I fare? Shattered and scattered are the altars of my home and native land! The shrines are calcined by flame; scorched are their lofty walls, and warped their beams of fir by the strong heat.'[1]

Nero listened in astonishment and alarm. The strain which the boy had chosen for his song was conceived in the grandest and most heroic style of the old Roman poetry, and was incomparably nobler and manlier than the conceits and

[1] Note 30.

tintinnabulations which were in modern vogue. The taste, the knowledge, the readiness, shown in the selection of such a strain were remarkable. And was this Britannicus who sang? Nero was always displaying and boasting of his divine voice, but it was harsh as a crow's in comparison with the ringing notes of his modest brother. And then the meaning of the song? Was it not aimed at Nero and his usurpation? Did it not show decisively the thoughts which were filling the soul of the dispossessed prince, and his clear consciousness that he had been robbed of his hereditary rights?

But there was something worse than this. For by the time that Britannicus had ended his song, the brief winter twilight had nearly ended, and the banqueting-room lay deep in shadow. It was too dark to distinguish individual faces, and this fact, together with the liberty of the jocund season, made those present less careful to conceal their thoughts. No sooner had the voice of Britannicus ceased than a murmur of spontaneous applause arose on every side, and not only of applause, but of pity and favour. Nero had meant to humiliate his brother: but, on the contrary, his brother had so behaved under trying circumstances as to win all hearts!

Jealousy, rage, hatred, swept in turbulent gusts across the Emperor's soul. He would have liked to strike Britannicus, to scourge those insolent guests. But he did not dare to take any overt step, for there had been no overt offence. Britannicus had been bidden to obey the festive order of the King of the Feast, and he had accomplished the behest as the others had done, in a way which kindled admiration. To act as if the chorus from Ennius had been aimed at himself would have been to betray uneasiness and confess wrongdoing.

He could not, however, conceal, and took no pains to conceal, his petulant spleen. Praise of another was poison to Nero. That the merit of any one else should be admitted seemed like a reflection on himself. 'They call Britannicus as good as me!' was a thought which filled his little soul with spite and wrath.

'This is poor stuff,' he said, in high dudgeon, pretending to yawn in the most insulting way he could. 'Who would have expected mock heroics at the Saturnalia?' Then he rose, and

said, with a slight wave of the hand, 'I am tired of this. I bid farewell to the guests. You may go without ceremony.'

Every one felt that the Emperor's ill-humour had thrown a deadly chill over the gladdest night of the year. With mutual glancings, and slight shrugs of the shoulder, and almost imperceptible liftings of the eyebrow, they departed. Only Tigellinus remained.

'What does Cæsar think of Britannicus now?' he asked in malignant triumph.

'I think,' said Nero, savagely, 'that swans sing sweetest before they die.'

'Ah-h!' said the base plotter; and he knew that now the first step in the Sejanus-course of his ambition was accomplished.

But Britannicus went straight from the supper to the rooms of his sister. Octavia sat there in the old Roman fashion of matronly simplicity. She was spinning wool at her distaff, and with kind heart she often gave what she spun to the children of her slaves. And while she spun, a maiden was reading to her.

It was the Christian girl Tryphæna. Usually she read from the Roman poets, and Octavia was never tired of hearing the finer odes of Horace, or the Æneid and Bucolics of Virgil. Sometimes she listened to the history of Livy, and to the treatises of Seneca, which she liked better than their author. But this evening Tryphæna — between whom and her young mistress there was a confidence akin to affection — had timidly asked 'whether she might read a Christian writing.' She knew that the Empress had been interested in the Christians by the conversation of Pomponia, and she was anxious to show how shamefully her brethren and sisters in the faith were misrepresented and slandered.

She drew forth from her bosom a manuscript, which had been lent her as a precious favour by the Christian Presbyter Cletus. It was a copy of a general letter of the Apostle Peter, which had been written to encourage the struggling Christian communities. It was not the letter which we now know as the First Epistle of St. Peter, which was written perhaps ten years later, but one of those circular addresses which touched, as did so many of the Epistles, upon the same universal duties, and used in many passages the same form of

words. She had read the beautiful passage about obeying the ordinances of man for the Lord's sake, and putting to silence by well-doing the ignorance of foolish men. And pausing there, she asked 'whether Octavia was interested in it, and whether she should continue.'

'Yes, Tryphæna,' she said, 'continue this strange letter. How different it is from the treatise of Seneca which you were reading to me the other day! There rings through it I know not what accent of elevation and sincerity.'

The girl then read the noble advice to slaves, and Octavia no longer wondered that Christian slaves so invariably deserved the comprehensive epithet of *frugi*. How well would it be if the worthless multitude of the slave population — the cunning *veteratores*, the impudent *vernæ*, the abject *copreæ* the pampered minions of luxury, the frivolous Greeklings — could act in the spirit of such exhortations!

Then she read the duty of husbands towards their wives, and of wives towards their husbands. Octavia bowed her head. She thought of all the numberless divorces; of the ladies who reckoned their years by the number of their husbands; of the scandals caused by the women who stooped to court gladiators and charioteers; of the fires of hell which Nero's unfaithfulness had kindled on her own hearth. She could think of the home of Pætus Thrasea as happy; but scarcely of another except that of Pomponia — and Pomponia was a Christian.

Tryphæna had just begun the following passage: —

'Finally, be ye all like-minded —'

when Britannicus entered. He did not know what was being read, and Octavia put her finger on her lip, and made a sign to him to sit down and listen.

The slave-girl continued —

'Finally, be ye all like-minded, compassionate, loving as brethren, tender-hearted, humble-minded; not rendering evil for evil, or reviling for reviling; but contrariwise blessing; for hereunto were ye called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For,

He that would love life,
And see good days,
Let him refrain his tongue from evil,
And his lips that they speak no guile:
And let him turn away from evil, and do good;
Let him seek peace, and pursue it.'

Britannicus listened in astonishment. 'Who wrote those noble words?' he asked. 'It cannot be Chrysippus; the Greek is too modern, and too unpolished. Is this some new philosopher? Has something been recently published by Cornutus or Musonius?'

'Perhaps you will see, if Tryphæna reads a little further,' said the Empress.

The slave-girl continued —

'And who is he that will harm you, if ye be zealous of that which is good? But if ye suffer for the sake of righteousness, blessed are ye: and fear not their fear, neither be troubled; but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord —'

'It is a Christian writing!' exclaimed the boy, in a low voice; and when he again caught the thread of the exhortation, Tryphæna was reading —

'For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing rather than for evil-doing; because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.'

'Go, Tryphæna,' said Octavia, deeply moved. 'I would talk with my brother alone.'

'A Christian writing!' said Britannicus again, as the slave-girl quietly glided out of the room. 'Who wrote it?'

'Tryphæna says it is part of a letter written to Christians, who are scattered everywhere, by a fisherman, Peter of Galilee, who, she says, was one of the apostles of Christus.'

'Octavia,' said Britannicus, 'I feel as if voices out of heaven were calling me. I feel as if this unknown Christus were drawing me irresistibly to Himself. It is a message to me — and a message before my death.'

'Your death, Britannicus?' said the Empress, starting, and turning pale. 'Oh, withdraw those ill-omened words.'

'Do not fear omens, Octavia. But you must hear what has happened to me.'

'You have been at the Saturnalitian feast, and you are soon to lay aside the golden ball and the embroidered toga,' said Octavia, proudly; 'and very well you will look in your new manly toga and the purple tunic underneath it.'

'Yes, but it reminds me of Homer. It is a "purple death," as Alexander the Great called it.'

'Why are your thoughts so full of gloom?' asked his sister,

pushing back the hair from his forehead, and looking into his face.

He told her all that had happened that night. She saw the fatal significance of what had occurred.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, sobbing, 'the gods are too cruel. What have we done that they should thus afflict our innocence? I lift up my hands against them.'

'Hush, Octavia! All these ridiculous and polluted deities — who believes in them any longer? But they represent the Divine, and what the Divine does must be for some good end, and we must breast the storm like Romans and like rulers, if we cannot reach the peace of which this poor Christian fisherman has written.'

'Our mother disgraced and slain; our father murdered; ourselves surrounded with perils; Nero on the throne. Oh, Britannicus! wherein have we offended?'

'We have not offended, my Octavia. The good suffer as well as the bad. The good are often made better by their sufferings.'

'Oh, my brother! my brother!' sobbed Octavia. 'I will not spare you. I cannot part from you. I have no one left but you. You shall not, you must not, die.'

He gently disengaged the arms of his sister from his neck, and kissed her cheek.

'I must not linger here any longer to-night,' he said. 'Farewell; not, I trust, forever, though I see that Nero has dismissed our friend Pudens, and put an ill-looking stranger in his place. But, Octavia, something — some voice like that of a god within me — tells me that it will be happier to die than to live.'

That evening, when Tigellinus left him, Nero first realised, with a start of horror, that he was on the eve of a fearful crime. By a rare accident he was alone. One of the reasons why he knew so little of himself was that he scarcely ever endured a moment's solitude. From the time that he awoke in the morning till the latest hour of his nightly revels, he was surrounded by flatterers and favourites, by dissolute young nobles or adoring slaves. It was only for an occasional

hour or two of state business that he saw any person of dignity or moral worth. This evening he would have been encircled by his usual throng of idlers if he had not broken up the banquet in anger long before the expected time.

He was alone, and his thoughts naturally reverted to the song of Britannicus, and to his own fierce mortification. The words '*He shall die!*' broke from his lips. But at that moment, looking up, his glance was arrested by two busts of white marble, standing out from the wall on pedestals of porphyry. He remembered the day on which they had been placed there by the orders of Claudius, in whose private *tablinum* he chanced to be sitting. One was a beautiful likeness of Britannicus at the age of six years. The other was a bust of himself in the happy and radiant days of his early boyhood, before guilt had clouded his brow and stained his heart.

He rose and stood before the bust of Britannicus. For some years they had been inmates of the same palace. They had been playmates, and at first, before the development of Agrippina's darker plots, there had been between them some shadow of affection. Nero had always felt that there was a winning charm about the character and bearing of his adoptive brother. Anger and jealousy whispered, 'Kill him;' conscience pleaded, 'Dip not your young hands in blood. There has been enough of crime already. You know how Claudius died, and who was his murderess, and for whose gain. Let it suffice. Britannicus is no conspirator. It is not too late, even yet, to make him your friend.'

He turned to his own bust. It represented a face fairer, more joyous, more mobile than that of the son of Claudius. 'I was a very pretty child,' said Nero, and then gazed earnestly into the mirror which hung between the busts. It showed him a face, of which the features were the same, but of which the expression was changed, and on which many a bad passion, recklessly indulged, had already stamped its debasing seal.

'Ye gods! how altered I am!' he murmured; and he hid his face in his hands, as though to shut out the image in the mirror.

And then his dark hour came upon him. The paths of virtue which he had abandoned looked enchantingly beautiful

to him. He saw them, and pined his loss. Was amendment hopeless? Might he not dismiss his evil friends, send Tigellinus to an island, banish Poppæa from his thoughts, return to the neglected Octavia, abandon his vicious courses, live like a true Roman? Was he about to develop into a Tiberius or a Caligula — he who had hated not long ago to sign the death-warrant of a criminal? Should history record of him hereafter that he had dyed the commencement of his power with the indelible crimson of a brother's blood?

'I am a tyrant and a murderer,' he cried. 'I am falling, falling headlong. Cannot I check myself in this career? Ye gods! ye gods!'

Whom had he to help him to choose the difficult course? Who would encourage him to turn his back on his past self? The philosophers, he felt, despised him. He could recall the cold, disapproving glances of Musonius, and Cornutus, and Demetrius the Cynic, on the rare occasions when he had seen them. And as for Seneca, of what use would it be to send for *him?* 'I have learnt to distrust Seneca,' he said to himself. 'He might have advised me better than he did in the matter of Acte.'

But the powers of evil never lightly resign a soul in which they have once planted their throne, and they took care to bring back upon Nero's heart a great flood of jealousy, suspicion, and dislike. And as he gave himself up to these ill-feelings, he began to feel how disagreeable it would be to grow up year by year with such a youth as Britannicus beside him. It would be impossible to keep him in leading-strings, or to thrust him wholly into the background. What if the virtues of Britannicus should only throw into relief the vices of Nero? 'No,' he said; 'Britannicus must die.'

So Nero deliberately chose the evil and refused the good, and the narrow wicket-gate of repentance was closed behind him, and the enemies of his soul flung wide open before him the portals of crime, and the wild steeds of his passions, as they sprang forth on their down-hillward path, soon flung from his seat the charioteer who had seemed inclined for one brief instant to tighten the reins and check their headlong speed.

CHAPTER XXIII

PERILS OF BRITANNICUS

'Cast thine eye
On yon young boy. I'll tell thee what, my friend,
He is a very serpent in my way;
And, wheresoe'er this foot of mine doth tread,
He lies before me. Dost thou understand me?
Thou art his keeper

SHAKESPEARE, *King John*, iii. 3.

AT this time a change came over the fortunes of Onesimus.

Pudens had been dismissed from his post among the *excubitors* of the Palace, under the semblance of honourable promotion, but in reality because Nero was doubly displeased by his fidelity to Britannicus and by the blow which (as he had accidentally discovered) Pudens had given him during the nocturnal encounter. But, as he had been an excubitor for so long, he had been accustomed to keep some of his armour and a few books in a room in the Palace, and he sent Onesimus to fetch them.

As he went to this room under the guidance of one of Cæsar's slaves, Onesimus heard a low voice singing the burden of one of the Phrygian songs with which he had been familiar in old days at Thyatira.

He was a creature of impulse, and, without thinking what he was doing, he took up the refrain of the song.

Immediately the door opened, and a beautiful dark-eyed girl asked in an agitated voice, and in the dialect of Phrygia, who had taken up the song.

The sound of his native tongue sent through the heart of Onesimus that indescribable thrill which we feel when past recollections are suddenly brought home to us in long-accumulated arrears. Greek had been spoken in the household of Philemon. He had scarcely heard his native Phrygian since he had been a free-born child, before he

had incurred the stain of being sold as a slave. He answered in Phrygian that he had known the song since he was a child at his mother's knee in Thyatira.

'In Thyatira?' said the girl; then gazing at him long and earnestly, she flung up her arms and exclaimed, 'Can this be Onesimus?'

'Do you know my name, lady?' he asked in surprise.

'Look at me,' she answered. 'It is twelve years since we met, but do you not recall —'

He fixed his eyes on her face and said in a troubled voice, 'You are like Eunice, the daughter of my mother's sister, with whom I was brought up as a child.'

'Hush!' she exclaimed; 'step aside for a moment, Onesimus; I *am* Eunice, but for many years I have not been known by that name. When the fortunes of our house were ruined I too was sold as a slave with you to the purple factory of Lydia; but a freedman of the Emperor Claudius saw me and brought me to wait upon the Empress Messalina. He thought my name too fine, and changed it to Acte.'

'Acte?' burst out Onesimus; 'then you are,'— he broke off and remained silent.

A blush suffused the girl's cheek. 'A slave,' she said, 'is forced to do her master's bidding. Nero loved me sincerely, and I loved him, and I was ignorant and very young. But it is past. The affections of Nero are turned elsewhere; yet none can say that I have ever used my influence for any but kind ends.'

'I reproached you not, Acte,' said Onesimus, 'if I must call you by your new name. I have far too much wherewith to reproach myself.'

'Meet me here,' said Acte, 'two hours after noon, and you shall tell me all your story, and how I can help you.'

Onesimus came that afternoon. He and Acte had been like brother and sister in the house at Thyatira in happier days, and he told her his sad story and all his sufferings, and how he had been rescued by the compassion of Pudens, and how, even in the house of Pudens, he had not shown himself worthy of the centurion's kindness, and how he loved Junia — and all his fears and all his hopes.

'Should you like to be one of Cæsar's household?' asked

Acte. 'If so, I do not doubt that I can get you a place by mentioning your name to the steward of the Empress.'

For the slave of a poor soldier the offer involved immense promotion and still larger possibilities. The thought of Junia checked Onesimus for a moment, but Acte told him that, if he rose in the house of Cæsar, there lay before him the far nearer chances of emancipation and riches, so that he would be more likely in due time to make Junia his own. She did not conceal from him that, in such a community as the sixteen hundred imperial slaves, the temptations to every form of wrong-doing were far deadlier than in a humble and more modest *familia;* but she longed to have near her one whom she could trust as a brother and a friend. Onesimus had acquired at Thyatira a good knowledge of all that concerned the purchase and the preservation of purple. It would not be difficult for Acte, without her name appearing in the matter, to secure him a place as the purple-keeper in the household of Octavia. She knew that Parmenio, the *servus a purpura*, had died recently, and that the qualifications for the post were a little less common than those which sufficed for the majority of slaves.

Onesimus, therefore, grasped at the dazzling bait of better pay and loftier position. That evening he spoke to Nereus, who, after consulting Pudens, told him that there would be no difficulty, whether by exchange or otherwise, in permitting his acceptance of the offer which had been made to him.

The great men who visited Cæsar looked down upon the hundreds of slaves who thronged the Palace as beings separated from themselves by an immeasurable abyss of inferiority; but to the mass of paupers who formed the chief part of the population servitude to the Emperor seemed a condition of enviable brilliance. We are told that when Felicio was promoted to the post of *Cæsar's* cobbler, he at once became a personage of importance, and was flattered on every side. Onesimus had much the same experience. Among those who knew him he found that he had risen indefinitely by the exchange which transferred him to the office of *servus a purpura* in the household of Octavia.

He was received into the slaves' quarters with the showers of sweetmeats and the other humble festivities which welcomed the advent of a new slave; and on the evening of his admission Acte sent for him.

'Onesimus,' she said, 'I have it in my power to befriend you; and if you will be faithful you may rise to posts of the greatest importance. But such promotion must depend on your character. May I trust you?'

'Surely, Acte!'

'Then let me confide to you a secret of the deepest import. You have seen the Prince Britannicus?'

'Yes. 'He looks a noble boy.'

'I fear that his life is imperilled — it is not necessary to say by whom I could weep when I think of the dangers which threaten him. Your office will give you opportunities of sometimes seeing him. It is not possible that I should meet you often; but here is a coin which has on it the head of Britannicus. If ever I send you one of these coins, as though I wanted you to purchase something, will you come to me at once? It will be a sign that he is menaced.'

Onesimus promised; and, in truth, the need for watchfulness was very pressing; for, on the day which followed the evening of the Saturnalitian games, Nero, fretting with jealousy and alarm, summoned Julius Pollio, the tribune on whom had been bestowed the post which Pudens had occupied, and sent him with a message to Locusta. She was allowed to move about the Palace, but was under the nominal charge of the guardsmen.

It might well seem amazing that a youth whose disposition was not innately cruel, and who a few years before had been a timid, blushing boy, caring mainly for art and amusement, should have developed, in so brief a space of time, into the murderer of his brother. But the effects produced by the vertigo of autocracy on a mean disposition are rapid as well as terrible. He had soon discovered that it was in his power to do exactly what he liked; and when he had learnt to regard himself as a god on earth, to whose wishes every law, divine and human, must give way, there was no vice of which he did not rapidly become capable. What was the life of a young boy, who stood in his way, to one who had unchallenged power over the life and death of millions of subjects over all the civilised world?

And yet the fate of his predecessors showed him that the pinnacle of absolute power was a place of constant peril. The loss of empire would mean inevitably the loss also of

life. Was this peevish lad to be a source of constant danger to the darling of the soldiers, of the mob, and of the world?

He had no reason to approach Julius Pollio with any of the circumspection with which Shakespeare represents King John as opening his designs to Hubert. When, at the suggestion of Tigellinus, he had appointed Pollio to supersede Pudens, he knew the sort of man whom he would have at his beck. He simply said to the tribune —

'I want some poison. Locusta is under your charge. Tell her to prepare some for me.' He did not trouble himself to mention the person for whom the poison was intended.

Locusta was too familiar with her trade to hesitate. Had she not taught many a guilty wife, in spite of rumour, in spite of the populace, to bury undetected the blackening body of her husband? Her fiendish nature rejoiced at the consciousness of secret power. She supplied Pollio with a poison which was, she assured him, of tried efficacy, and she again received a large sum of money in reward for her services. Nero knew that among the wretches by whom his mother had surrounded Britannicus, and not all of whom had been removed, it would be easy to find some one who would administer the poison. He decided that the deed should be done at some private meal, and by the hands of one of the boy's tutors, who never thought of shrinking from the infamy. In that midnight and decadence of a dying Paganism the crime of ordinary murder was too cheap to excite remorse.

But it was impossible that all this should pass unobserved. Acte had been brought under Christian influences, and was anxious by all means in her power to atone for the unintended wrong which her beauty had inflicted upon Octavia. Nero was no longer her lover, though she still lived in the Palace, and held a high position as one for whom the Emperor had once conceived so strong an infatuation. She had her own slaves assigned to her, and of these some were Christians. In her self-imposed task of watching over the life of Britannicus she asked them to obtain information of any circumstance that seemed to threaten him with danger. From them she learnt that Nero had been closeted with Julius Pollio; that Pollio had paid a visit to Locusta; and that, when Locusta had sent a small vial to Nero, the Emperor had summoned to his

presence the tutor of Britannicus, who had been observed to carry away the vial in his closed hand. Her spies further told her that, by watching and listening, they had ascertained that the poison was to be given to the son of Claudius, not at supper but at the light midday meal which he took with Titus. After they had been enjoying vigorous exercise in the morning the boys usually showed an excellent appetite.

More than this they could not discover; but this much Acte confided to Onesimus, and implored him to keep watch, and if possible, devise some means by which to forewarn Britannicus of his imminent peril.

At first the quick Phrygian youth, who was understood to be under the patronage of Acte, had been a favourite in the household, and he found little difficulty in making friends with the cooks and other slaves who superintended the meals of the imperial family. By a visit to the kitchen — in which he flattered the cook and his young assistants by the lively curiosity which he expressed about the various dishes, and the enthusiasm with which he admired their skill — he learnt that, as a special treat, a beccafico was to be sent in for the *prandium* of Britannicus, and he conjectured that it would be poisoned. That the cook was innocent of any evil design he was sure, and he guessed that the fig-pecker would be poisoned by some slave of higher office about the young prince's person. But he knew not how to forewarn the unsuspecting boy. The time was short. It was not easy to find an excuse by which he — whose duty lay in a different part of the Palace — could find access to the apartments of Britannicus. And whom could he warn? There was scarcely an instance known in which any one had dared to interfere between an emperor and his victims. In the general paralysis of servility, in the terror inspired by the little despicable human god, in the indifference to bloodshed caused by the games of the amphitheatre, why should any one be troubled by one death the more?

But Onesimus, less familiar with a world so plague-stricken with torpid corruption, felt in his heart a spring of pity for the doomed boy. After rejecting plan after plan as impossible, it flashed upon him that he might get a message conveyed to Titus. He had but a few minutes left, and Titus could

not be found until he and the prince, still warm and glowing from their game of ball, entered the parlour. Onesimus grew desperate, and, boldly summoning a young slave, sent him to Titus with the extemporised message that the centurion Pudens urgently desired to speak with him.

Titus went into the hall, and recognised Onesimus as the youth whom his own kindness had first brought under the notice of Pudens. The Phrygian led him to a remote part of the hall, behind one of the statues of the Danaides, and whispered to him, 'Britannicus is in danger. Let him not touch the bird which has been provided for his lunch. Oh, stay not to ask me anything,' he added, when Titus seemed inclined to question him further; 'hurry back, if you would save his life.'

Titus hurried back, but the meal was quite informal, and Britannicus, hungry with exercise, had already helped himself to the dainty set before him.

'Give me some of that fig-pecker,' said Titus desperately; 'I am very fond of those birds; we catch them at Reate.'

Britannicus at once handed the dish to him with a smile. 'I don't know what Epictetus would think,' he said, 'of a Stoic who is fond of dainties.'

'It is meant exclusively for you, Sir,' said the *pædagogus*, hastily. 'I wonder that Titus should be so greedy.'

Titus blushed; but the remark helped him out of a serious difficulty. He had thought in vain how he could avoid eating the bird which Onesimus had told him was poisoned.

'After that remark,' he answered, 'of course I cannot touch it.'

'Then give it back to Britannicus,' said the tutor.

'Nay,' said the prince; 'if Titus is to be called greedy for liking it, I must be greedy too. I have had enough. Besides there is a taste about it which I do not like. Bread and a few olives are more than enough.'

He pushed away his plate, and when they had risen from the table, he looked curiously at his friend.

Titus blushed again. 'I know,' he whispered, 'that *you* will not think me greedy, Britannicus.'

'Titus,' he answered, 'you know something.'

'Ask me nothing,' said Titus; 'I was only just in time, if, indeed, I have been in time.'

Britannicus was silent. He suspected that some attempt had been made upon his life, and that it had been partially frustrated by the faithfulness of his friend. He had no doubt on the subject, when, a little later, he was seized with violent pains. Happily, however, he had scarcely more than tasted of the beccafico, and in the fit of sickness which followed, nature came to his relief. His recovery was aided by the pure and glowing state of his health. After a few hours of excruciating agony he sank into a long refreshing sleep.

He woke in the twilight, to find himself lying on a couch, while Octavia and Titus, sitting on either side of him, were rubbing his cold hands.

'Where am I?' he asked. 'Oh, I remember!' And he said no more; but he took the hand of Titus, and drew his sister near to him and kissed her.

The hearts of all three were too full for words, but as they sat there a message came that the Augusta was coming to visit them.

Agrippina was of course admitted, and left her attendants at the door. As the lovely haughty lady entered, they could not help observing, even by the dim light of the two silver lamps which had just been lit, that a change had passed over her features, and that she had been weeping. Haughty they still were, but wrath and disappointment and failure, purchased at the cost of crime, had stamped them with an expression of agony, as though she wore the brand of Cain. When she heard of the sudden illness of Britannicus, she divined its cause too well. While her power was waning so rapidly, she had been no longer able to maintain the elaborate system of espionage which had helped her when she was Empress; but she, too, was aware that Pollio had visited Locusta, and the misgiving had seized her that the poison might be meant for herself. That it turned out to be for Britannicus was hardly less appalling to her. She felt that her imprudence had made Nero jealous of him, and that his death would deprive her of her last resource. She rejoiced, therefore, unfeignedly at the boy's recovery, and when she visited him he saw that, for the first time, she spoke with genuine kindness to Octavia, and that her expressions of pity and condolence to himself were sincere

There was no feigning in the hot teardrops which fell on his cheek when she kissed him, and as he lay there, weak and pale, she felt, with deepening remorse for the wrongs which she had inflicted on him, that he did not shrink from her embrace.

Nero, too, sent messages of enquiry to 'his beloved brother' by his freedman, Claudius Etruscus. As he heard them, the old spirit of Britannicus flashed out.

'Tell Cæsar,' he said, 'that this time his poi —'

Before the word could be spoken, Titus with hasty gesture placed his hand over his friend's mouth, and Agrippina, knowing well that every syllable would be reported, and interpreted in the most malignant manner, turned her queenly head to the freedman who had brought the message.

'Tell the Emperor that his brother is much better, but is still light-headed. Claudius Etruscus,' she said, 'you pass for an honest man. I pray you, do not mention to Nero anything which Britannicus has spoken in his delirium.'

Etruscus bent low, and, touched by passing pity at the scene which he had witnessed, he determined to abstain from reporting what he had heard. 'The Augusta,' he said, 'has always been kind to me. Her wish shall be obeyed.'

But Nero was restless and anxious, and was pacing to and fro like a caged wild beast. The thought of plots and perils haunted him. That morning, as he passed along the covered way which led from the Palace into the theatre, he had seen the red stain of the blood of Caligula on the walls — a red stain which could not be washed out — and felt a spasm of suffocation as if a dagger were at his throat. He was frightened to hear from Etruscus that Agrippina was with his brother. Were they conspiring to bring about a revolution? He would himself go and see.

He had been drinking, and as he entered took no notice of Titus or of Octavia. To Agrippina he only vouchsafed a cold salute, and she, dreading another scene in the presence of witnesses, rose and left the chamber. He took the cold hand of Britannicus in his own hot and feverish grasp, and a pang of hatred shot through him as he felt it shrink at his touch. The boy was propped up on his couch with pillows, and a hectic spot burned on each of his pallid cheeks; but his eyes were filled with strange light, and, as

he fixed them on the face of Nero, they seemed to read his inmost soul.

Nero averted his glance. He dared not look upon his victim. Indeed, under that steady gaze, the consciousness of his crime brought the tell-tale crimson over his face. He was not yet too far gone to blush, though the days were rapidly approaching in which he would wear a front of brass.

He muttered some hypocritical words of condolence, which rang false and were overdone. Britannicus spoke not.

Octavia said, 'Pardon his silence, Nero; he is too weak to thank you.'

'I did not ask *you* to interfere,' answered Nero brutally.

'I give you such thanks as are due,' said Britannicus in a faint voice; but he tried to withdraw his hand from Nero's grasp.

Nero rose in a towering passion. 'I came to inquire about your illness. You meet me with scowls and ingratitude,' he said, flinging away the hand of Britannicus. 'If you do not choose to behave as a brother, I will make you feel that you are a subject. Octavia and Titus, you may retire.'

'Oh, do not leave me alone. I am very ill,' pleaded the poor prince. 'Indeed, indeed I cannot be left alone.'

The terrible thought which had flashed through the mind of Nero — the thought that, if left alone, the boy might be killed that night — had woke its reflection in the mind of Britannicus. But Nero strode angrily out of the room, and neither repeated nor withdrew his command.

'May the spirits of all the good protect thee!' said Octavia, as she fondly kissed her brother. 'I dare not stay; it might be the worse for thee if I did.'

'But I will stay, Empress,' said Titus, 'and I will do my best for him.'

When the young Empress had withdrawn, Titus beckoned to her faithful freedwoman Pythias, and told her to send for Onesimus. He came, and Titus, after slipping into his hand an aureus, which the Empress had left for him as a reward for his faithful warning, begged him to be on the alert, and to return in an hour. The Phrygian went to Acte, and told her all that had occurred. She kept him near at hand, and in a short time informed him that two of Nero's worst creatures

— Tigellinus and Doryphorus — were closeted with the Emperor, and that there was too much reason to fear that some deadly measure would be attempted that evening.

Such was indeed the case. For now, to the joy of Tigellinus, Nero had openly declared that Britannicus must be swept out of his path; had even admitted to him that poison had been attempted, and had failed.

'How soon do you wish the deed to be done?' asked the wicked adventurer.

'If we are to prevent some accursed plot,' said Nero, 'it cannot be too soon.'

'To-night?'

'To-night, if you will,' answered Nero, 'but it must be secret. There must be no scandal. A story must be trumped up. The Augusta must be deceived. Octavia must be deceived. None of his adherents must know of it, unless they can be trusted to hold their tongues.'

'Nearly all the people about him are in our pay,' said Tigellinus. 'I think it can be done.'

That night no soldier was on guard near the room of Britannicus, and Titus regarded this as a fatal sign. When he received from Onesimus the intelligence which Acte had given him, he said that he would draw his own bed across the door of the Prince's room inside, so that none could enter without his knowledge. He asked Onesimus to keep watch in concealment outside, and make a noise if any one should approach.

'I can imitate exactly the bark of the Empress's lap-dog,' said Onesimus, 'for Aponia, who has charge of it, often lets me tease it. If I make this noise in the quiet of the night it is sure to set other dogs barking, and then I will spring out of my hiding-place as if the sound had awoke me.'

Proud of the confidence reposed in him, proud to be the guard of a Cæsar's life, Onesimus put on a black lacerna, shrouded himself in a dark corner, hidden behind the shield of an Amazon. The Palace sank to deep silence, broken only by the faint, distant tramp of the sentinel who kept watch outside the passage which led to the cubiculum of the Emperor.

About an hour after midnight he heard a stealthy footstep approaching, and saw the occasional gleam of a lantern which

was hidden under the cloak of the murderer. Breathless with anxiety, he watched and listened. The slave came near to the room of Britannicus. Noiselessly he placed his lantern on the floor, then he drew a large dagger, and Onesimus saw its blade flash in the light as the wretch examined it. One instant more and his hand was thrusting an oiled key into the lock.

Then it was that Onesimus gave a short, sharp sound like the bark of a pet dog. The murderer started violently. Onesimus repeated the sound, which was immediately taken up by a dog which belonged to one of the freedwomen. Hesitating no longer, he leapt out of his shelter with the challenge, 'Who goes there?' and at the same moment Titus, who had slept in his clothes, unfastened the door, and sprang in front of it with a sword in his hand.

Without staying an instant longer the murderer dashed down his lantern and fled, for slaves and freedmen were heard stirring on every side. Onesimus did not attempt to pursue him, but quietly slipped back to his own cell. He knew that for that night the dark plot was frustrated and Britannicus was safe.

To the slaves whom the noise had disturbed Titus only said that he had been troubled by the nightmare, and bade them return to sleep. But not a few of them shrewdly suspected that they had not been told the whole truth.

CHAPTER XXIV

BRITANNICUS UNDERGOES A NEW EXPERIENCE

> 'For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
> And hope and fear — believe the aged friend —
> Is just a chance of the prize of learning love;
> How love might be, hath been indeed, and is;
> And that we hold thenceforth to the uttermost
> Such prize, despite the envy of the world.'
>
> BROWNING, *A Death in the Desert.*

It was New Year's Day in Rome. The day was kept as a universal holiday. Everybody aimed at cheerfulness, and abstained from any word of evil omen. Quarrels were suspended; calumny was hushed. Fires were kindled on every side, and fed with scented woods and leaves of odorous saffron. The gilded fretwork of every temple-roof glimmered with twinkling reflections of the sacred flames. All the people were clad in white, and went in procession to the Capitol. The lictors were provided with new fasces; the magistrates were clad in new purple, and assumed, for the first time, their curule chairs of ivory. The white oxen of Clitumnus were led for sacrifice to the altar of Jupiter, their necks wreathed with garlands. Friends exchanged presents, which, even when they were of trifling value, yet served to show that they had not forgotten to express their love. Among presents from Octavia, and Titus, and Pudens, and Pomponia, and other friends, Britannicus, who had now recovered, was greeted by Epictetus with the customary gift of gilded dates — called *strenæ*, whence the French *étrennes* — and a little honey in its snowy comb. These the poor lame boy had bought, with such copper coins as he had been able to save, at the little market for such trifles near the Porta Mugionis; and he had not forgotten to bring a few sprigs of vervain, good-naturedly given to him as an augury of blessing by one of the priests at the half-forgotten shrine of Vacuna, on the Sacred Way. But Britannicus had received more splendid presents than these.

Agrippina had given him a double-branched silver candelabrum, up the shaft of which crept a wild-cat towards two unsuspecting birds perched on either dish above. But when he showed it to Octavia she shuddered. To her fancy it seemed as if Nero were the wild-cat, and herself and her brother the harmless birds.

Never had Britannicus and Octavia been more sad than in the days which followed Nero's frustrated plots to assassinate his brother. They knew that further attempts would not be long delayed. On February 13 Britannicus would be fifteen years old, and it would be impossible to withhold from him the manly toga. But he felt sure that the sword was dangling by a hair over his neck, and that he would not long be suffered to live.

And thus, in the dawn of youth, he found himself in a situation so terrible that it has shaken the fortitude of many a full-grown man. Even the iron nerves of Cromwell were affected by the daily danger of assassination; and now Britannicus never sat down to a meal without dread of treachery, and never went to bed without a misgiving as to whether that sleep would not be his last. From the latter terror Titus relieved him as much as he could, by nightly drawing his own couch across the door. Onesimus had told Titus that if any deed of darkness were in immediate contemplation he would be almost sure to hear of it from Acte. Yet, in spite of all, the poor boy's mind might have been unhinged by the secret and manifold dangers with which the hatred of the Emperor surrounded him, had it not been for the lessons which he had heard from the humble followers of the gospel. Never could he forget the awful expansion and dilatation of spirit which had accompanied the emotion he had experienced at the Christian gathering. At that moment he had felt a foretaste of immortality.

And, happily for the Empress and himself, there remained one more transcendent experience before the fall of the thunderbolt which separated them from each other.

The Ides of January were kept as a festival to Jupiter, and the next day was also the anniversary on which Octavianus had been saluted by the title of Augustus. The day was therefore observed with various ceremonies, and, as they were chiefly of a public character, it was easier for the children of

Claudius to move about with less observation than usual. They had long desired to hear the words of one who had seen Jesus, and on the morning of January 14 a letter reached Octavia from Pomponia, conveying a cautious intimation that now their wish could be granted. Their young companion Flavius Clemens was to visit the Palace in the afternoon, and after they had supped with Aulus Plautius they were to arrange the way in which the rest of the evening should be spent.

When the supper was over, the two boys, Clemens and Britannicus, disguised in the dress of humble slaves, went with Pudens down the Velabrum and along the bank of the Tiber, which they crossed by the island and the Fabrician and Cestian bridges. The region in which they found themselves was poor and squalid, and was largely inhabited by Jews. The Jewish and Gentile Christians at this early period worshipped in separate communities, but they met together on so great an occasion as the visit of an Apostle. But the laws about assemblies and foreign superstitions were a two-edged sword which might easily be wielded with fatal effect, and it was desirable for the Christians to hold their gatherings with as little publicity as possible, in order to escape the hatred both of Jews and Pagans. This meeting, therefore, was to be held at a remote spot in the hollow of one of the *arenariæ*, or sand-pits, and those who attended it were to use one or other of the Christian watchwords. They were to approach the place in scattered groups and from different directions, while scouts were stationed in the neighbourhood to give instant signal of approaching danger.

Using these precautions, Britannicus and his attendants found themselves among the latest arrivals at the rendezvous. The winter darkness, deepened by the overhanging sides of the tufa quarry, rendered it necessary to have a few lights, but most of the assembled Christians extinguished or concealed their lamps. The dimness, the silence, the starry sky which overhung them, the strained expectation, the signs of intense devotion, made the scene overwhelming in its solemnity. At last a little group of the chief Christian presbyters, headed by Linus, was seen to approach. They passed under the shadow of the cliffs, and emerged before the table, on which one or two lamps were burning. Then the presbyters

divided to the right and left hand, and the light fell full on the face and figure of one man who stepped a pace or two to the front.

He was dressed, as was not unusual at Rome, in Eastern costume. He was a man a little past the prime of life. The hair which escaped from under his turban was already sprinkled with grey. His dark eyes seemed to be lighted from within by a spiritual fire; his figure was commanding, his attitude full of dignity. His face was a perfect oval, and the features were of the finest type of Eastern manhood. When once you had gazed upon him it seemed impossible to take the eyes from a countenance so perfect in its light and spiritual beauty — a countenance in which a fiery vehemence was exquisitely tempered by a pathetic tenderness. His whole appearance was magnetic. It seemed to flash into all around him its own nobleness, and to kindle there that flame of love to God and man which burnt on the altar of his own heart. That such a soul should be convinced of a truth seemed alone sufficient to convince others. That such lips should testify to a fact rendered all disbelief of the fact impossible to those who once fell under his influence. That such a man could be the herald of a new religion seemed like a certain pledge that the faith which he held must sooner or later overcome the world.

In his aspect was something indescribably different from that worn by the noblest philosophers of Rome. On all sides, in the Roman amphitheatre and in the Roman streets, you saw faces which were cruel, and proud, and seamed with every evil passion; faces cunning, and sly, and leering, and degraded; the slavish faces of those who were slaves in soul, and the ignoble faces of those whom an ignoble society had cowed by its terror and degraded by its vice. Even in the Senate you saw noble lineaments on which servility, and care, and a life spent under tyrants and in households where every slave might be a potential enemy, had impressed the stamp of gloom and fear. But in the face of this Apostle there was softness as well as strength, and hope as well as courage. His eyes shone with a joy which seemed to brighten in the midst of affliction, as the stars brighten in the deepening twilight.

As he entered the whole assembly rose to their feet by a

spontaneous movement of reverence, and then no less spontaneously some of those present fell upon their knees. But instantly his voice was heard, as, in an accent of command, almost of sternness, he bade them rise.

'Rise,' he said, 'brethren and saints. What homage is this? We are men of like passions with yourselves. I do not mistake your feelings. Ye think that such reverence must be due to a disciple whom, unworthy as he was, yet Jesus loved. But know ye not that every true saint among you is nearer to Him now by His Spirit than it was possible for us to be in the days of His flesh? Has not our brother Paul taught you in his preaching that your bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost, who dwelleth in you, except ye be reprobate?'

Then Linus rose and said, 'Let us kneel and thank God in prayer that He has suffered an Apostle of His Son to visit us, and then we will join in a common hymn.'

When the simple prayer was over they united their voices in that earliest Christian hymn which has been happily preserved for us by Clement of Alexandria. They began in accents soft and sweet and low —

'Shepherd of sheep that own
Their Master on the throne,
Stir up Thy children weak
With guileless lips to speak,
In hymn and song, Thy praise,
Guide of their infant ways.'

Then the strain swelled louder —

'O King of saints, O Lord,
Mighty, all-conquering Word;
Son of the highest God,
Wielding His wisdom's rod;
Our stay when cares annoy,
Giver of endless joy;
Of all our mortal race
Saviour, of boundless grace,
O Jesus, hear!'[1]

They knelt down once more, and the strain of thanksgiving rose among them, with no confusion in its blended utterance, as they responded to the words of their bishop. And when the voices ceased Nereus, the slave of Pudens, said, after

[1] Note 31. — Early Christian hymns.

a brief pause, 'O that John of Bethsaida would tell us first of that Resurrection whereof he is one of the appointed witnesses!'

John rose, and gave them the narrative which long years after he embodied in his Gospel.

He told them of the startling words of Mary of Magdala on that first glad Easter morning; and how he himself and Peter ran together to the empty tomb, ere yet they knew the Scripture that He must rise again from the dead.

He told them of the vision of angels which appeared in the tomb to Mary, and how Jesus had spoken to her in the garden.

He told of the appearance to the Ten, and the words of peace; and again, on the next Sunday, to the Eleven, when He convinced the doubting Thomas, and bade him to be not faithless, but believing.

He told them of the appearance on the shore of the misty silver sea, and of His last behest to Simon Peter; and he corrected the false impression as to what had been said concerning himself, which had not been, as had been mistakenly reported, that he should not die, but 'If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?'

And as he spoke these words, in a voice which rose like a divine melody, the attention grew more and more rapt, and, as he ended, the awful, penetrating, thrilling sound of the tongue began to be heard. But John checked it by a gentle lifting of his hand, and Linus said, 'Let the spirits of the prophets be subject to the prophets. Let us rather hear the witness of the Lord.'

Then Hermas, slave of Pedanius Secundus, the City Prætor, rose. and asked, 'What meant the Lord by those words, "that he tarry *till I come*"? When should be the day of His coming?'

'That question we also asked,' said John, 'before His death; and though He spake of signs of the times, like the redness and lowering of the sky, yet He added to us, "Of that day and that hour knoweth no man — no, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father."'

'And are there no signs of the time now?' asked Linus.

'There are many,' he answered, 'by which we may know that the coming of the Lord is even at the door. I have walked

through this Babylon, and have seen all the splendour of her merchandise, as of Tyrus in old days, and amid it all — slaves and souls of men. Yea, and as I have witnessed all the cruelty and all the vileness, like the scum of that seething caldron which the prophet saw of old, I feel compelled to ask with him, "Shall I not judge for these things?" saith the Lord; "shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" Yea, sometimes a voice seems to ring within me which says, "Woe, woe! to the dwellers upon earth!" The great tribulation must come of which the Lord spake and the Antichrist must be revealed, and God must accomplish the number of the elect.'

'The night is drawing in, O brother, revered in the Lord,' said Linus; 'and it were well that we should speedily separate to our homes. But ere we part give to us one word of exhortation of how we are to save ourselves from this untoward generation.'

The Apostle raised his hands towards heaven, and his eye seemed to be lit with heavenly ecstasy as he answered in this brief exhortation: 'My children, love one another. Love is the fulfilling of the law. There is no fear in love. Perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. And this commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.'

When he had thus exhorted them they broke out with passionate jubilance in the hymn —

'Fisher of men, the blest,
Out of the world's unrest,
Out of sin's troubled sea
Taking us, Lord, to Thee,
With choicest fish, good store,
Drawing thy nets to shore,

'Lead us, O Shepherd true;
Thy mystic sheep, we sue!
O path where Christ hath trod,
O way that leads to God,
O Word, abiding aye,
O endless Light on high,
O glorious Life of all
That on their Maker call,
Christ Jesus, hear.'

All present knelt in prayer, ending with the united utterance of the words that the Lord had taught; and the great

Amen rose like the low sound of distant thunder. Then the Apostle raised his hands and blessed them. Again the *Amen* and the solemn *Maranatha* rolled through the air like the sound of mighty waters, and after a moment of deep stillness the assembly peaceably departed.

Britannicus and his attendants, wishing to avoid notice, waited for a time, until the twinkling streams of light from the torches and lanterns carried by the worshippers grew fainter and more scattered. Hence it happened that they were left the last in the *arenaria*, except the little group of deacons and presbyters who stood round John of Bethsaida. The young prince had been deeply moved by the look and by the words of the Beloved Disciple. He wished to see him nearer, and whispered to Pudens not to go until he had passed them, for never yet had he seen so glorious a specimen of lofty and holy manhood.

But the boy's heart thrilled with strange emotion as the Apostle paused on his way, and, standing before the little group, fixed his eyes upon his face, approached him, and softly laid his hand upon his shoulder.

He motioned to all except Flavius Clemens to stand aside, and he was left speaking to the two youths.

'My sons,' he asked, 'do ye believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?'

The youths were silent, till Britannicus, who felt in his heart the confidence of an exceeding peace, said —

'My father, I know not. All that you have said to us is beautiful as a song of heaven. It stirs my heart; it seems to give wings to my spirit; but I know too little, and all is yet too strange.'

'My son,' said the Apostle, 'go in peace. It is given me to know who thou art; thy slave's attire does not conceal thee from me. Nay, start not; none else shall know. But the seed hath been sown in thy young heart; it shall blossom and bear fruit in a life beyond. For there is a baptism, not of water only, but of blood. Would to God that thou mightest remain for the furtherance of the kingdom of His Son; but it may not be. And my message to thee is, "Be strong, and He shall comfort thine heart, and put thou thy trust in the Lord."'

He laid his right hand gently on the young prince's head

and blessed him, and his whole soul seemed to thrill under that holy touch.

'And hast thou no word for me, my father?' said Flavius Clemens.

The Apostle turned towards him, and kindly laying his left hand on the boy's dark curls, he said —

'I say to thee, as the Lord said to another, "And thou too, my son, when thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself and wentest whither thou wouldest; but when thou shalt be old another shall gird thee and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." Thy life shall be prolonged, and thou shalt rise to great things; but thy heart shall be the Lord's, and many a year hence thou too shalt be His witness. One of you shall see my face no more, but the Angel of His Presence bless you both.'

He spoke, and passed out of their sight into the gloom, leaving in their hearts a sound as of angelic music, a light as of purple wings. Neither of them spoke, or could speak. In silence and haste they made their way back over the dark flowing river to the house of Aulus Plautius. Flavius was conducted home by faithful Christian slaves, while the escort of the Empress accompanied her and her brother to the Palace, which still rang with sounds of revelry. And that night Titus wondered at the radiant serenity of the countenance of his friend, and Britannicus slept as sweetly as a child; and as he slumbered the spirits of the blessed dead seemed to keep guard over him, and he smiled to hear strange snatches of immortal melody.

CHAPTER XXV

LOCUSTA.

'Circe inter vernas nota Neronis.'— TURNUS, *Fr.*

NERO had been angered beyond measure by the failure of both his attempts upon the life of his brother, but he had also been a little terrified. A feeling of the eternal sanctity of the moral law had scarcely ever found a place in his slight and frivolous mind; but he was by no means free from superstition. He did not believe seriously in the gods; but he believed more or less in omens, and for a time he wavered in the dreadful purpose of committing his earliest unpardonable crime.

But he could not waver long. Britannicus was rapidly approaching his fifteenth year. It was evident that he was also developing new powers. He was already nearly as tall as Nero, and while Nero's early beauty was beginning to fade the face of Britannicus became constantly nobler. All this Nero observed with deepening rancour, and to this was added a secret terror. He began to fear lest the Prætorians should find out their mistake in rejecting this princely boy for one who, in spite of his small accomplishments, was so far his inferior. He never visited Agrippina without noticing that in some way she regarded Britannicus, if not as the mainstay of her hopes, at least as the ultimate resource of her vengeance and despair.

But it was Sophonius Tigellinus who had the chief hand in goading Nero to the final consummation of his guilt. The Emperor was not by nature sanguinary; his cruelty was only developed amid the rank growth of his other vices.

He was planning with Tigellinus a banquet of unusual splendour which was to be held at the Feralia — the Roman All Souls' Day, a festival in honour of the dead — on February 7.

'You will have to give another banquet, Cæsar,' said Tigellinus, 'on the Ides (February 13).'

'Why?'

'Because that day is the fifteenth birthday of Britannicus; and I presume that then you will let him assume the manly toga.'

'You are always dragging in the name of Britannicus,' said Nero. 'I hate it, and I hate him.'

'On the contrary,' said the Prætorian; 'I should say that you love him very much. Who can tell how soon he may be your successor?'

'My successor?' answered Nero, scowling. 'What do you mean?'

'I meant no offence, Cæsar,' said Tigellinus; 'forgive the faithfulness of a friend and an honest soldier who loves you. Do you not see what a fine young fellow Britannicus is growing? Octavia brings you no children. He must in any case succeed you.'

Nero paced the room, as he always did when he felt agitated; and, after leaving his remarks to work, Tigellinus added —

'Besides it is not easy to divine the plans of the Augusta, with whom at present you are on such bad terms?'

Nero strode up and down with still more passion, and Tigellinus continued at intervals to heap fuel on the flames of his fury.

'You heard the murmurs of applause which greeted his insolent song the other night?'

Nero nodded.

'Do you think that the Prætorians are absolutely loyal to you? I have heard them talking about Britannicus among themselves. Pudens, I know, is a favourite officer of theirs, and he adores Britannicus. Supposing it came to civil war, do you think that you would be quite sure to win?'

Nero still said nothing.

'Why not put an end to the difficulty? Rome is sick at the thought of another civil war. Every one would be glad if you put your brother out of the way. And really, why should you hesitate? You have attempted it twice already, only you have been unlucky.'

By this time the subtle tempter had worked the Emperor into a frenzy of wrath and fear. The crime had long been assuming shape in his mind, and in point of fact he had already incurred its guilt.

'It shall be done on the Ides,' he said. 'Send Julius Pollio to me.'

Tigellinus struck while the iron was hot, and the tribune was in attendance before Nero's rage had had time to cool.

'Bring Locusta here at once,' he said.

The tribune executed the command, and Locusta's green eye gleamed even more balefully than was its wont when the tribune ushered her into the Emperor's chamber.

But Nero received them both with a burst of petulant anger.

'You have failed me!' he exclaimed. 'You are traitors, both of you. While you are taking measures to shield yourselves you leave me obnoxious to the worst perils. I told you to provide me with a sure poison.'

'We were but anxious to avert suspicion, Emperor,' said Locusta, in the soft tones which involuntarily reminded the hearer of a serpent's hiss. 'You know there is a Julian law against murder and poisoning.'

The anger of Nero showed itself in mean, ignoble ways, and, like a bad boy in a passion, he was not ashamed to strike Locusta in the face.

'Don't talk of the Julian law to me, woman,' he said; 'as if I was afraid of the laws! Make me a poison which shall work like a dagger-stab, or you shall be ordered off for execution to-morrow on the old charges.'

Locusta shrank from his blow, and for one instant glared at him as though she would have liked to poison *him*. But she knew his power, and felt sure of his rewards; so she merely said —

'Britannicus is such a strong, healthy boy, that the task is less easy. But Cæsar shall have his wish. I have a poison here which will do the work.'

'Try it, then, on some animal,' he said.

'I dare say the tribune could procure me a kid,' said Locusta.

A slave was despatched to find a kid, and when the bounding, playful creature was brought Locusta dropped some of the poison on a piece of bread dipped in milk.

The kid ate the bread and milk, and frisked no more but lay down and curled up its limbs, which quivered with convulsive twitchings.

'Leave the poison to work,' she said, 'and if Cæsar will summon me an hour hence the kid will be dead.'

An hour later she was summoned. The kid lay on the ground, feeble and with glazing eyes; but it was not dead, and Nero was in the worst of humours. He pointed to the little creature and said —

'Woman, you are trifling with me! Add henbane, or hemlock, or any other infernal thing you like, to your accursed poison. It must be made stronger.'

Locusta dropped other ingredients into the phial, and another animal was sent for. The slave brought a little pig. Some of the poison was sprinkled on a leaf of lettuce. The creature ate it, and in a few moments died in spasms.

'That will do,' said Nero, flinging to the woman a purse of gold. 'If all goes as I desire, you shall have ample recompense. But breathe one syllable about this matter, and you shall die under the scourge.'

She went, leaving the phial in his hands. He struck a silver bell, and ordered Tigellinus to be summoned.

'I have decided,' he said to the Prætorian. 'Britannicus shall die.'

'You will deserve the title of "father of your country," which you so modestly rejected,' said Tigellinus. 'Augustus received that title on the Nones of February, more than eighty years ago; doubtless the Senate will confer it upon you soon after the Ides.'

'But how is the deed to be done?' asked Nero gloomily. 'I shrink from the business even if it be necessary.'

'What are you afraid of, Cæsar?'

'The voice of the people. It can shake the throne of the greatest.'

'How will the people know anything about it?'

'Britannicus has a *prægustator*, just as I and Agrippina have. If that wretch is poisoned too, every one will know what has taken place.'

'His *prægustator* is —?'

'A freedman named Syneros.'

'In your pay, of course?'

Nero nodded.

'And you can trust him?'

Nero nodded again.

'Then leave the rest to me,' said Tigellinus, 'and do not trouble yourself any further in the matter. If I have your orders, regard the deed as done.'

'I give no orders,' said Nero; 'but here is Locusta's poison.'

Glad of her success in having twice saved the life of Britannicus, Acte was more than ever determined to be a watchful guardian over him. She was feverishly anxious to ascertain every plot formed against him, and had gone so far as to take a step of extreme peril. She had heard that, in the reign of Tiberius, when evidence had been wanted against the Consular Sabinus, three persons of no less rank than senator had concealed themselves in the roof, and looked down through Judas-holes, to report his conversation. Might she not use for good the devices which had been perverted to such deadly ends? At any rate she would try. She ascertained from Tigellinus that Nero had been amusing himself by trying the efficacy of certain poisons, and he mentioned this in answer to Acte's inquiries as to the reason why his slaves had carried a dead kid out of Nero's room.

But Acte learnt more by her other devices. The rooms which she occupied happened to adjoin the apartment assigned to Tigellinus; and by pretending a desire for some small repairs she had ordered the marble panelling of her room to be removed in one corner, and a cupboard to be constructed behind it. A person concealed in this recess could, by the aid of a few holes perforated in the walls, hear what was going on in the room of Tigellinus. Then she sent to Onesimus the coin on which was the head of Britannicus, and when he came to her room she concealed him in the recess, and he overheard enough to make him suspect that Britannicus was to be poisoned a week later.

The information was vague, and to act upon it was perilous; but Acte told Onesimus to inform Titus, and then to use their combined wit to defeat, at all costs, the wicked plan.

And this Onesimus meant to do, and might have done but for his own misconduct.

He was weak in character, and if he had gone astray in the safe obscurity of the house of Pudens he was liable to far worse temptations in the *familia* of the Palace. All his old

companions cringed to the handsome slave of Octavia, who might rise, as others had done, to be an all-powerful freedman. With his youth, his quickness, his good looks, who could tell whether he might not even become a favourite of Cæsar himself, and have untold influence and power? Onesimus found himself the centre of flattering attention in the slave world both of the Palace and the city. He began to think himself a person of importance. Was he not under the immediate patronage of Acte, and, in order to avoid scandal, had it not even been necessary to make it known that he was her kinsman and foster-brother, brought up under the same roof?

Onesimus was too unstable to withstand the combined temptations by which he was surrounded. The image of Junia might have acted as an amulet, but he scarcely ever got an opportunity of seeing her, for Nereus looked upon him with anything but favour. He kept aloof from Christians, for he never heard them mentioned except with contempt and hatred, and he liked the atmosphere of compliment and pleasure. Slaves naturally imitate the vices of their masters, and the wicked world of the aristocracy was reflected in darker colours in the wicked world of servile myriads. Flinging all that he had learnt of morals to the winds, betting, gambling, frequenting the lewdest shows of the theatre and the most sanguinary spectacles of the games, and forever haunting the cook-shops, the taverns, and the *Subura*, he spent his almost unlimited leisure in that vicious idleness above which only the best slaves had strength to rise.

And so it happened that at the time when he ought to have been most on the alert he got entangled in a low dispute at a drinking bout, and returned to the Palace not only wounded and smeared with blood, but also in a state of shameful intoxication. In this guise Nero had seen him, and, without even knowing his name, or anything about him, had furiously ordered him to be taken to his steward, Callicles, for severe punishment. He had again been scourged, put into fetters, thrust into a prison, and fed on bread and water. This disgrace was concealed from Acte, and while she was relying upon his quick intelligence to convey a warning to Britannicus, and to devise means of frustrating the plot of Tigellinus, Onesimus lay sick, and shamed, and fettered in a prison among the lowest of offending slaves.

CHAPTER XXVI

A BANQUET AND A CONVERSATION

'The citron board, the bowl embossed with gems,
And tender foliage wildly wreathed around
Of seeming ivy . . . whate'er is known
Of rarest acquisition; Tyrian garbs,
Neptunian Albion's high testaceous food,
And flavoured Chian wines with incense fumed,
To slake patrician thirst.'

DYER, *Ruins of Rome.*

WE are far more likely to underrate than to exaggerate the splendour of a great Cæsarean banquet. It differed wholly from the soft, luxurious, disreputable feast of voluptuous debauchees at which we have been present in the house of Otho. Nothing was allowed to disturb its magnificent decorum.

Nero's feast was arranged in the highest style of imperial grandeur. Many a gilded and ivory lectica, borne by African slaves in rich liveries and surrounded by crowds of freedmen and clients, had been carried down the Sacred Way and the Street of Apollo; and if any distinguished nobles looked through the curtains the populace raised a cheer. The guests were set down under the great arch of the state entrance.

The noblest senators were there, and the representatives of the oldest families of Rome, and not a few who were destined to wear hereafter the purple shroud of imperial power. Most of them came dressed in togas of dazzling whiteness, and there were few who did not display the broad purple band of the senator, or at least the narrower band of the Roman knight. The knights were conspicuous by their large gold rings, the senators by the crescent of silver or of ivory which they wore in the front of their shoes. Those who, like Otho, were professional dandies were clothed in the most elaborate dresses, but nearly all the guests wore gay tunics under their white togas, which, during the banquet, they laid aside for the lighter and more elegant loose dress of green, violet, or

other vernal colours. Nero himself received them in a paludament bordered with golden stars. Agrippina was dressed in robes of rich violet, and on her neck was a great opal from the spoils of Mithridates. Octavia had arrayed herself in one of the most costly dresses from the imperial wardrobe, and her stola was of that amethystine tint the use of which Nero afterwards reserved for himself alone.

But many of the other ladies were hardly less splendid in their attire. The necklaces which reached to their breasts had often as many as fifty fine rubies dependent from their links of gold. Some of them carried fans of peacocks' feathers. Some were dressed in robes variegated with soft and brilliantly coloured plumage; the mantles of others had broad bands of gold sewed across the folds at the breast; others wore robes of interchanging sheen, or of the favourite mallow-colour, or Coan dresses of fine linen, woven with gold thread. The whole atrium looked like a bed of flowers, and even the pavement flashed with the light of jewelled feet.

When the guests entered the vast triclinium they were almost dazzled with the display of splendour which greeted them. Beautiful statues of youths stood round the room, holding in their hands lamps of gold, which filled the house with the fragrance of perfumed oil. Other cressets of fantastic workmanship hung by golden chains from the gilded fretwork of the roof, which was so constructed that its aspect and colouring could be altered between each course, and that scented essences and little presents of flowers and ornaments could be showered down upon the guests. The great triclinia and sigma-tables of Mauretanian citron and ivory blazed with gold and silver. The goblets from which the guests drank were enriched with gems. The oldest and richest wines of the Opimiam, Falernian, and Setine vintages stood cooling in vases full of snow, round which were twined wreaths of ivy and of roses. In front of Nero's seat was a superb candelabrum of solid gold representing a tree with lamps hanging from its boughs like golden fruit. It belonged to the Palatine Temple of Apollo, and had been one of the spoils taken by Alexander the Great at the sack of Thebes.[1] Among the other ornaments of the table were a handled vase of white and purple, for which Nero had paid a million sesterces, and

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* xxxiv. 8.

the myrrhine goblet which alone Augustus had reserved for himself from the treasures of Cleopatra. There were also some of the *vasa diatreta*, curious triumphs of art in which a reticulated shell-work of pale blue was fastened by threads of glass to the opalescent vase within. Even the sawdust which was scattered over the polished floor was dyed with minium and breathed of saffron. Underneath the tables had been sprinkled a mixture of vervain and maidenhair, which was believed to promote hilarity in the guests.[1] Vitellius, as he gloated on the veins of the thyine table at which he sat, and the glories with which it was laden, exclaimed, 'If Jupiter and Nero were both to invite me to dinner, I should accept the invitation of Nero.' [2]

Even the ancients had a custom closely analogous to our 'saying grace.' Before the guests sat down, a number of boys, in white robes of byssus, placed upon the table figures of the lares, and carrying round a jar of wine, exclaimed, 'May the gods be favourable!'

When the ice had been broken by the usual commonplaces, there was no lack of animated and even brilliant conversation among the most polished representatives of a society in which conversation was an art. Much of the talk, indeed, was trivial, and much was scandalous. This was the inevitable result of a tyranny which had driven even literature into such safe ineptitudes as the imaginary conversations between a mushroom and a fig-pecker, which had earned an immense reward from the Emperor Tiberius. Seneca, Burrus, and Pætus Thrasea, who were present and sat at the same *sigma*, talked on the foreign affairs of the Empire, canvassed the doings of Felix in Palestine and the movements of Tiridates in Armenia. Lucan was eagerly discussing with Otho the sources of the Nile. Not a few of the ladies were listening to stories of magic and vampires and were-wolves told them by travelled youths from Athens or Ephesus, and gossip amply filled up the talk of others.

Britannicus, with some of the youngest scions of noble families, sat, instead of reclining, at a lower table than the elder guests. Augustus had introduced, and Claudius had kept up, the custom of young guests dining on these public

[1] Plutarch, *Sympos.* i. [2] Note 32.

occasions in less state, and being served with a less luxurious meal.

The boy had no suspicion of danger, for Acte, though surprised not to have heard from Onesimus, did not know that her purpose had failed in consequence of the levity and folly of her foster-brother. The face of the young prince was radiant, for his heart was full of peace. His whole soul seemed to be expanded by the larger horizons which had opened before him since he had learnt about the truths and promises of the new faith. The light of the dawn, which shone for him upon the distant hills, seemed to shed its rays even upon the evil and troubled world. He maintained a pleasant talk, broken by many a happy and innocent laugh. His peril had been mercifully hidden from him, and on the previous night he had had a dream so happy, and so unlike anything which he had imagined as possible, that he hardly knew how to tell it to Titus and Clemens, who sat on either side of him.

In his dream he had seemed to himself to be sinking to sleep amid strains of melody more tender than any which he had ever heard. And, while his soul was thus lapped in Elysium, a winged youth, whose face looked pure as the flowers of spring, and whose wings were coloured like the rainbow, had come to him and offered him his choice between purple with a diadem, and a white robe with a wreath of lilies. He had chosen the white robe, and with a radiant smile the Vision dropped on the ground the purple robe, and Britannicus saw that it was rent with dagger-thrusts and stained with blood. Then the youth had taken Britannicus by the hand and led him through a vale of fire unhurt into a pleasant land beyond. Bright hands had there clothed him in the robe of shining white, and had placed the wreath of lilies round his hair. After that he looked up, and on every side of him were clouds of light, full of glittering faces; and two other winged youths grasped him by the hands, and led him along a vista of light towards a throne, which looked like a sapphire; but, before he could see who sat thereon, he awoke in such an ecstasy that he lay quivering with joy till the music and the fragrance died away. Never in all his life had he experienced such unutterable blessedness, and it seemed to him as if he could never be unhappy again.

But while Britannicus was thus supremely happy the lord of the banquet was miserable. How could he be happy? On one side of him reclined his mother, once so passionately fond of him, now bitter, furious, and sarcastic — a woman whose life was poisoned by the disappointment of her ambition. On the other side of him reclined his wife, Octavia, young, beautiful, not unaccomplished, but to him cold as death. He could buy the venal love of as many as he chose, but he could command no love that was not either purchasable or shameful. The fires of Tartarus were burning on the altar of his Penates, and his own heart was smouldering with secret crimes, which could only be shared with the most villainous or the most despicable of mankind.

And of all the guests how few were even tolerably happy, except one or two of the boys at the table of Britannicus! Under that thin film of iridescence what abysses of misery filled the Stygian pool of the society which lay beneath!

Among the guests that night was the young king Herod Agrippa II. He sat in a conspicuous position at the highest table. As a boy he had been at Rome, but this was the first time that he had been present at any public gathering for many years. He had only just arrived on a mission from Palestine. He had inherited Chalcis, the little kingdom of his uncle Herod, but he was anxious to add to this domain the city of Tiberias and part of Galilee, where Herod Antipas had ruled, and this year the Emperor granted his wish. Nero had entrusted him to the care of Gallio, with whom he was eagerly conversing in Greek, and whom he overwhelmed with multitudes of questions. They spoke low, and, as they reclined at the banquet side by side, there was little chance of their being overheard, though their conversation was often of that kind which was the more interesting from its being somewhat dangerous.

'How gay Cæsar's guests must be,' said Agrippa; 'they are all smiles!'

'It is with many of them the fixed smile of a mask,' said Gallio. 'They smile to hide their misery.'

It was necessary for the success of Agrippa's mission that he

should stand well at Rome, and know something about the chief members of Roman society. He therefore asked Gallio the names and history of some of the guests. We will follow his pointed fingers, and perhaps the answers of Gallio may enable us to realise something more of the condition of things in pagan Rome. For Gallio did not spare a single reputation. He did not require to invent. Malignity had no need to search with candles. She only had to tell the truth, and there were few guests there whose reputation did not wither at her breath.

Agrippa first wanted to know something about the ladies who were present, and Gallio drew caustic sketches of Poppæa, on whom Nero's eyes were constantly fastened, and of Calvia Crispinilla. Agrippa's attention was next attracted by Domitia, whose *tutulus*, or conical head-dress, it was the exclusive task of a slave-maiden to adorn.

'That lady,' said Gallio, 'is the Emperor's aunt. She used to neglect him, but now that he is Emperor she worships the very ground on which he treads.'

'And who is that lady in the sea-green Coan dress whose hair seems to be powdered with gold dust?'

'That is Junia Silana, nominally a bosom friend of Agrippina, really her deadliest enemy. Observe that lady near her, whose grey hairs are so elaborately dyed, and her cheeks so thickly rouged, and who is dressed with such juvenility. She is Ælia Catella. Would you believe that, though she is nearly eighty, she still dances?'

'O tempora! O mores!' said Agrippa. 'That exclamation sufficed for Cicero a hundred years ago; but he would want stronger expletives now.'

'I will give you Horace for your Cicero. Did he not sing —

> '"What has not cankering Time made worse?
> Viler than grandsires, sires beget
> Ourselves, yet baser, soon to curse
> The world with offspring baser yet."'

'Is there *no* honest and virtuous woman here?' asked the young king.

Gallio pointed a little mockingly to the king's sister, the beautiful Berenice, who had come with him to Rome. She was now twenty-six, but had lost none of her voluptuous

loveliness. In her ears were earrings, each formed of three orient pearls, and the famous diamond on her finger — a gem of priceless value, her brother's gift — blazed conspicuously at every movement of her hand.

Agrippa blushed and bit his lips; and Gallio always courteous, added with seriousness, 'There are some, but not many. My brother, Seneca, is not complimentary to the ladies. He speaks of them as "animal impudens, ferum, cupiditatum incontinens,"[1] which is, to say the least, ungrateful of him, for our mother, Helvia, was perfect; and our aunt, Marcia, gained him his earliest honours; and his own wife, Paulina — she sits there — is one of the Roman matrons who almost deserve the obsolete epitaph, "She stayed at home; she spun wool." I think, however, that Seneca exaggerates the number of the ladies, who, he says, count the years not by the consuls, but by the number of their divorced husbands.'[2]

'Point me to another such lady as Paulina,' said Agrippa.

'There is one,' answered Gallio, bending his head towards the Empress Octavia; 'and there is another.' He pointed to a lady dressed simply in a white stola beneath a light-blue palla, who wore no jewels except the cameos which fastened the loops of her sleeve. It was Antistia, the daughter of Antistius Verus, the wife of Rubellius Plautus. 'Antistia,' said Gallia, 'is as pure and devoted a lady as you could find anywhere. There, too, sits Servilia, daughter of Barea Soranus; and yonder is Arria, wife of Pætus Thrasea. Pomponia Græcina, wife of Aulus Plautius, is the sweetest and noblest matron in Rome; but she avoids Court society, and she is not here. Nor is Claudia, the fairest of maidens, the daughter of King Caractacus.'

'And who is that handsome and venerable old man at the second table?'

'The handsome and venerable old man — his name is Domitius Afer — is, I am sorry to say, a handsome and venerable old scoundrel. He is, or rather was, the greatest orator of his day — as the Emperor Tiberius said, a born orator, *suo jure disertus.* But he has been neither more nor less than an informer, and one of bad character. He would have lost his head under Caligula, but he pretended to be so thunderstruck and overwhelmed by the mad Emperor's elo-

[1] *De Const. Sap.* 14. [2] Sen. *De Benef.* iii. 16.

quence that he not only saved his life but rose into high favour. But it is time for him to leave off making speeches. Whenever he attempts a great oration now, half his hearers laugh and the other half blush.'

'And the young man near him?'

'King,' said Gallio, 'I shall begin to think that you are a physiognomist, and are picking out some of the worst persons present. That is another informer; his name is M. Aquillius Regulus. He is a fortune-hunter as well as an informer. He has earned by infamy a fortune of sixty million sesterces. I had better tell you at once that there are several of them nearly as bad. That brazen-faced man is P. Suilius Rufus, who helped Messalina to ruin Valerius Asiaticus. He was convicted of taking bribes as a judge even in the reign of Tiberius. And, worst of the whole company, there is Eprius Marcellus, a splendid orator, but a man, as you see, of savage countenance, whose eyes flash their fiercest flame, and whose voice rolls its loudest thunder, when he is denouncing any person of special virtue.'

'Well,' said Agrippa, 'unless I am tiring your courtesy I will turn to another table. Who is that extremely stout personage with a red face, bushy eyebrows, and apoplectic neck, who is devouring his dainties with such brutal voracity?'

'He is a very distinguished person named Vitellius, chiefly distinguished, however, for eating and drinking. He is descended from a cobbler and a cook. He began his childhood with Tiberius at Capreæ. His father set up golden statues of the freedmen Narcissus and Pallas among his household gods, by which merit he won a statue on the rostra. Our friend then turned charioteer to please Gaius, gambler to please Claudius, and has now curried favour with Nero by urging him to sing. His domestic history is not amiable. He had by his first wife a son named Petronianus, to whom she left her wealth. Vitellius made him drink a cup of poison, which he says that the youth had prepared for *him*.'

'I shall begin to believe,' said Agrippa, 'that the Greek sage was right when he said, "Most men are bad." Why, Berytus would not show more dubious characters — nor even Jerusalem.'

'But there are some honest men,' said Gallio, 'as well as

virtuous women. Burrus is fairly honest; Fenius Rufus is indifferently honest; Pætus Thrasea is honest, though in these days even he has to dissemble; Helvidius Priscus, Barea Soranus, and Arulenus Rusticus, friends of Thrasea, are as honest as the day. So is that old man Lucius Saturninus, who, strange to say, in spite of his worth, has reached the age of ninety-three without being either killed or banished.'

'I will only ask you one more name. Who is the man to whom Domitius Afer is talking?'

'His name is Fabricius Veiento. At present he is only known as the editor of a book called "*Codicilli*," which is immensely popular and is bringing him in a fortune. It is composed of the spiciest libels against every senator of note whom he ventures to attack. He has found that one secret of getting rich is to pander to the appetite for scandal, and half the people who are talking so fast around us are whispering stories which he has discovered or invented for them.'

At this moment their conversation was rudely interrupted.

CHAPTER XXVII

DEATH IN THE GOBLET

'Fratrum, conjugum, parentum neces, alia solita parentibus ausi.' — TAC. *Hist.* v. 3.

A CRY rang through the banquet-room!

It was the cry of Titus. Every guest started as if a thunderbolt had fallen. In that guilty time, when obscene wings flapped about so many gilded roofs, when the sword dangled by a hair over so many noble heads, when foes cut throats by a whisper, when any day might expose a man to denunciation for imaginary crimes by one of the slaves whom he regarded as his natural enemies, any sudden movement, any unexpected event, was enough to drive the blood from the blanching cheek. But when such a cry — so wild, so startling — rang over the tumultuous sounds of an imperial banquet, they knew not whether the very earth was not about to open beneath their feet.

What had happened?

Britannicus, as we have said, was in no alarm that evening. Of all times and places it seemed the least likely to attempt his poisoning. The fact that at this feast he had his appointed *prægustator*, and that two deaths would terribly reveal a crime, was, he thought, a sufficient safeguard.

But these were the very reasons why Tigellinus had arranged that Nero's desire for his brother's murder should be carried out that night. He fancied that no one would suspect Nero of choosing a scene of such festive splendour and unusual publicity for a crime so dark.

The ingenuity of wickedness easily got over the difficulty about the *prægustator*. This man was one of the smooth, civil, plausible wretches who abounded at that epoch. He was a Greek slave named Syneros, trained in the worst vices and ready to sell his soul at any time for a few sestertia. He

handed to Britannicus a myrrhine goblet filled with some mulled Falernian, which he tasted first. It had been purposely made so hot that no one could drink it. The prince gave it back, and told Syneros to put some cold water to it. The slave did so, and into that cold water — which he had hidden in a vial of Alexandrian glass behind one of the coolers full of snow — had been already dropped the deadly potion which Locusta had given to Nero.

Britannicus drank it unsuspectingly, and Titus had taken it up and drunk a little, when his eye caught sight of Britannicus, and with the cry which had alarmed those three hundred guests he had dropped the myrrhine vase, crashing it to shivers on the mosaic floor.

For Britannicus had scarcely finished his draught when with one wild look he clutched the arm of Titus, and then, half supported by Clemens, sank speechless and breathless from his seat. It seemed as if in one instant the swift poison had pervaded all his limbs. His last conscious thought had been for another. Titus remembered with undying gratitude, that the clutch upon his arm had saved his life. He felt sure that with one and the same flash of intuition Britannicus had recognised that the draught was poisoned, and had tried to prevent Titus from drinking it.

But when the guests turned their eyes to the table where the young prince was sitting they saw the terror-stricken look on the faces of Titus and the other boys, and Flavius Clemens supporting in his arms the white and convulsed form of the son of Claudius. At that spectacle many of them leapt from their couches, and even began to fly in different directions. Who could tell what charges of plots might be founded on such an incident, and who might be involved in them? But those who were more familiar with the mysteries of the Court, though they had started to their feet, stood rooted in their places with their eyes fixed on Nero, waiting for some sign to guide or reassure them.

And then Nero showed the consummate coolness of villainy which could hardly have been expected from so young a murderer. He was short-sighted, but he could very well guess what had happened, and he had his little speech ready prepared. Indeed, he had been repeating it over to himself while he vainly endeavoured to get up a conversation with his

mother or his wife. Putting his emerald to his eye,[1] he raised himself on one elbow from his soft mass of cushions, and said, amid the dead silence —

'Oh, I see what is the matter. My brother Britannicus, poor boy, has been afflicted from childhood with the comitial disease. His epileptic fit will soon be over, and all his senses will return. Pray resume your places, my friends. Do not let the mirth of the banquet be disturbed by this little accident.'

Agrippina was in a ferment of alarm. She could scarcely believe her ears. That ready lie about the epilepsy! She knew — and many of the guests knew — that Britannicus was a fine strong lad, who had never had an epileptic attack in his life. One thing only could have happened. Britannicus, in whom rested the last hopes of her vengeance and her ambition, must have been poisoned by his brother. Infernal gods! was it possible? Could this have been the deed of that youth whom it seemed but yesterday that she had clasped to her bosom as a lovely, rosy, smiling child? Panic, consternation seized her. 'How long,' she thought, 'will he abstain from the prophesied murder of me, his mother?' She panted; she shuddered in every limb; she required all her efforts not to faint; she grew white and red by turns, and those who were watching her saw the cup of wine which she seized shake so violently in her trembling hand that she spilled half its contents over her bosom.

'She, at least, is as innocent of this as Octavia herself,' whispered Seneca to Burrus. 'But, oh! horror! where will these things end?'

Octavia looked as though she had been turned to marble. She spoke no word; she made no sign. Agrippina had tried in vain to prevent her speaking countenance from betraying the violence of her emotions; but Octavia, young as she still was, and little more than a child, had been taught from her earliest years to hide her emotions under a mask of impassibility; and, indeed, the blow which had thus fallen upon her was beyond her power to realise. The awful grief struck her dumb. One shrinking motion, one stifled scream, and she reclined there as though she were dead — as pale and as motionless, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, conscious of

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* xxxvii. 16.

nothing, her white cheek looking all the more ghastly from the crimson roses which circled her dark tresses and fell twining over her fair neck.

But how should the mirth of the banquet be resumed? The stereotyped smile on the features of Seneca looked like a grin of anguish. The brow of Pætus Thrasea was dark as a thunder-cloud. Clemens and several of the prince's boyish friends were weeping audibly and uncontrollably, while Titus, already feeling ill as well as terrified, was sobbing with his head on the table. Nero himself in vain attempted a fitful hilarity, which could wake no echo among guests of whom many —

> 'Like the Ithacensian suitors of old time,
> Stared with great eyes, and laughed with alien lips,
> And knew not what they meant.'

So dense a cloud fell over their minds that it was a relief to all when, without waiting for the termination of the banquet, Nero dismissed his guests, availing himself of the excuse that the comitial disease had always been regarded as an evil omen, and that, though he hoped his brother's attack would prove but slight, he saw how deeply it had affected the spirits of his friends.

They had come to that superb feast in pride and gaiety; they hurried home in horror and alarm.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST OF THE CLAUDII

'Tu quoque extinctus jaces
Defiende nobis semper, infelix puer,
Modo sidus orbis, columen Augustæ domus,
Britannice.'

SENECA, *Octavia.*

THE poor young prince was carried by the slaves to his cubiculum. The poison had been like a dagger-thrust; but he was not quite dead. He lay at first unconscious, his breast heaving with irregular spasmodic sighs. Acte stole into his chamber, wept over him, strove to revive him, and, if possible, to assuage his pangs. It was too late. He did not recognise her. The moment he could escape from the triclinium Titus came, and found the slave-boy Epictetus sitting at the foot of the couch, with his head covered. 'He yet lives,' said the boy, raising for one moment a cheek down which, in spite of every Stoic lesson, the tears chased each other fast. Titus sat down by his friend, called his name, clasped his hand, and wailed aloud without restraint. One almost imperceptible pressure of the hand proved that there was an instant recognition. A Christian slave had secretly brought Linus into the room, which was easy in so numerous a household; and bending over him Linus sprinkled his brow with pure water, raising up his eyes and his hands to heaven. None present knew what it meant; but Britannicus knew. A lambent smile lit his features for a moment, like the last gleam of a fading sunset, for he understood that he had been baptised.

It was the last conscious impression of his young life. The moment that the banquet ended, Octavia, still in her splendid apparel, hurried wildly to the chamber. It was a chamber of death. Already the incense was burning, already the cypress had been placed before the Propylæa of the Palatine. The

boy lay there, silent, noble, beautiful, pale as a statue carved in alabaster; and Octavia disburdened the long-pent agony of repression in such a storm of weeping that her attendants tried to lead her away. But she tore off her jewels, and flung her arms round the corpse of her brother, and laid her head upon his breast, and sobbed aloud. Father, mother, brother, her first young and noble lover, Silanus — all who had ever loved and cared for her were gone. He was the last of all his race. The last male Claudius, whose line was derived through that long and splendid ancestry of well-nigh seven hundred years, was lying before her on that lowly bed!

He was to be buried that very night, as though he had been a pauper and not the noblest boy of an imperial aristocracy. There was something fatally suspicious in the rapidity with which every preparation was made.

The obolus for Charon was put under his tongue; the fair young body was arrayed in its finest robe, was laid on a bier, and was carried to the vestibule with its feet towards the door; and as it lay there Titus brought in his hand a wreath of lilies, which he had begged from the keeper of the exotic flowers, and placed it on the innocent forehead of his friend. He turned away with the words, which could scarcely make their way through sobs, 'Farewell! forever farewell!' But he never forgot that boyish affection; and long years after, when he was Emperor, he placed in the Palace a statue of Britannicus in gold, and at solemn processions he had an equestrian statuette of ivory carried before him which represented the young prince whose love to him had been far truer and closer than that of his own brother.

Only for one instant did Nero venture to look on his handiwork. He came into the vestibule in his festal robes, his eyes heavy, the garland still on his dishevelled hair, accompanied by Tigellinus and Senecio.

'I suppose he died in the fit?' he said to one of the slaves.

'He breathed his last,' answered the man, 'within an hour of being carried from the feast.'

Something disquieted Nero. Furtively pointing his finger towards the dead boy, he said something to Tigellinus.

'A little chalk will set that right,' whispered Tigellinus in reply, and he gave an order into the ear of his confidential

slave. Leave the corpse a moment,' he said aloud to the attendants; 'the Emperor wishes to take a last look at his brother.'

The slave of Tigellinus brought a piece of chalk; and Nero, with his own hand, chalked over some livid patches on the dead boy's face, which already betrayed the horrible virulence of the poison.

'Why linger in the charnel-house?' said Senecio affectedly. 'Cæsar, may we not have some more wine to refresh our sorrow?'

They turned away, and, before they were outside the hall, a light laugh woke a shuddering echo along the fretted roof.

The bearers were on the point of lifting the bier when Agrippina entered. The dullest of the spectators could see that there was nothing feigned in her anguish as she wept and tore her hair. She grieved for Britannicus, whom she had so irreparably wronged, but hers was a wild and selfish grief, the grief of rage and frustrated purposes. She had built upon this boy's life to keep her son in terror of her influence. She saw now of what crimes Nero had already become capable. He who in so brief a space had developed into a fratricide, how long would it be ere he would spare the life of an obnoxious mother? She felt, even then, in a bitterness of soul which could not be expressed, that even-handed justice was commending the ingredients of the poisoned chalice to her own lips.

The obsequies were not only disgracefully hurried, but disgracefully mean. Every ceremony which marked a great public funeral was omitted. There were no lictors dressed in black; no *siticines* with mourning strains; nor *præficæ*, or wailing women; no *lessus*, or funeral dirge. Happily too, as some thought, there were not the customary buffoons, nor the *archimimus* to imitate the words and actions of the deceased. Though he was the noblest of the noble, no liberated slaves walked before his bier, nor men who wore the waxen images of his long line of ancestors. No relations followed him — men with veiled heads, women with unbound tresses. Many a freedman, even many a slave, had a longer funeral procession than the last of the Claudii.

They bore him to his funeral amid storms of rain, which

seemed to betoken the wrath of Heaven. The spectators were few, but those few saw by the struggling light of their lanterns that where the rain had washed off the chalk the pale face was marked with patches of black. They saw this, and pointed it out to one another in silence.

The last offices were paid in haste by the drenched and half-frightened attendants. The body was laid on the small rough pyre. Julius Densus was there, and Pudens, and Titus, and Flavius Clemens. Nero had not the grace to be present. With averted face Pudens thrust in the torch. The rain had damped the wood, and at first it would not kindle, but they threw oil and resin into it. At last it blazed up; the body was consumed: the glowing embers were quenched with wine. A handful of white ashes in a silver urn, a sad memory in a few loving hearts, were all that remained on earth of the poisoned son of an emperor of Rome.

But, when all were gone, a few Christians stole from under the dense shadow of the trees in that lonely spot, and bowed their heads in prayer, and sang a low hymn. And among them was he whose hand of blessing had rested on the young prince's head, and whose voice of prophecy had foretold his doom.

And to Pomponia Græcina and her husband, and to Pudens, Claudia, Titus, Epictetus, and one or two faithful slaves, the world was poorer than before; but in the heart of the hapless Octavia there was a void which on earth could never be filled up. And her heart would haply have broken altogether but for the consolations which she received from Pomponia, and from Tryphæna, her Christian slave. For Pomponia had received a letter from Ephesus, where, at that time, Paul of Tarsus was labouring; and the friend who wrote it told her something of Paul's teaching respecting the resurrection of the dead. One passage in particular, which this friend quoted to her, rang in her memory: 'It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.' And so, as there remained for Octavia less and less hope of any joy on earth, glimpses were opened to her more and more of a hope beyond the grave. And one passage in particular from one of the old Jewish books, which Linus had pointed out to Pomponia,

seemed to her more lovely than any fragment of lyric song, and constantly woke a sweet echo in her thoughts. It was —

'Thy dead men shall live ; together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust ; for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall bring to life her shades.'

CHAPTER XXIX

AGRIPPINA AT BAY

'Caritas quæ est inter natos et parentes dirimi nisi detestabili scelere non potest.' — Cic. *Læl.* viii. § 28.

There were some who thought it an unparalleled tragedy that Britannicus should not only have died so young, but also at a banquet, and so suddenly, and by the hand of a bitter enemy, and under his very eyes. There were few in the Pagan world who realised the truth that he who needed their shuddering pity was not the boy who perished, but the youth who murdered him.

At first Nero was alarmed by what he had done. He thought that he would be haunted by the manes of the wronged Britannicus. He shunned Octavia, and if he met her was forced to avert his glance. He faced his mother with shy moroseness. He never dared to sleep alone. The sound of a shaken leaf terrified him. A thunderstorm, which happened a few days later, drove him into a paroxysm of terror, during which, like Gaius before him, he hid himself under a bed, and sent for the skin of a seal as a fancied protection against the flame of heaven.

But it was not thus that he was to feel the wrath of God. The doom was past, but the punishment deferred. The most terrible part of his retribution was that he was let alone to fill to the brim the cup of his iniquity. Sin was to be to him the punishment of sin, and the avenging scourge was put into the hand of his own vices. The first fearful crime which he had committed ought to have lit up his dark conscience with its fierce, unnatural, revealing glare. It did so for a moment, but only to leave him in deeper darkness. His moral sense was hardened to a still deadlier callosity, until he developed into the execration of mankind.

What helped him to this rapid obduracy was the vileness and hypocrisy of the world around him.

The death of Britannicus had to be announced to the Senate. The eyes of Nero had to weep crocodile tears, and the pen of Seneca to be employed in venal falsities. No one could doubt the hand of Seneca in the elegant pathos of the sentence which told the Conscript Fathers that deaths so immature as that of Britannicus were subjects of such bitter grief that his funeral had been hurried over in accordance with the ancestral custom which forbade the protraction of anguish by public oration or funeral obsequies.

'I have lost the aid of my brother,' continued the specious oration which Nero learnt by heart; 'no hopes are left to me save in the commonwealth. A prince like myself, who is now the sole survivor of a family born to the supremest dignity, needs all the love and all the help of the Senate and the people.'

Even the semblance of sorrow was abandoned almost before the cypress had been moved from the doors of the Palatine. Nero was anxious to implicate others as far as possible in the frightful responsibility which he had himself incurred. Britannicus had left a considerable heritage in houses, villas, and personal possessions, which had come to him from his father and mother. Nero, who as yet had not squandered a treasure which might well have been deemed inexhaustible, had no need of these things, and was eager to get rid of them. He therefore distributed them among leading senators, giving a pleasant villa to Seneca and a town house to Burrus. He thought that gifts would serve as a sort of hush-money, and both statesmen felt with inward anguish that they were the price of blood. Seneca was specially humiliated. He knew what men thought and said of him in secret, and his own conscience could not accept the facile excuse that it would have been fatal to refuse a largesse which was meant to bind his destiny irrevocably with that of the guilty Emperor. He thanked Nero for his munificence, and acted as if nothing had happened. Yet the inward voice spoke to him with unmistakable clearness. He called himself a Stoic: he wrote grand eulogies of virtue and simplicity. Ought he to have entered the magic circle of a court steeped in licentiousness and blood? Ought he to have yielded to the avarice which made his usury so notor-

ious? Would Pætus Thrasea have accepted gifts intended to screen complicity with murder? Would such gifts have been offered to the modest poverty of Cornutus or Musonius? or, if so, would they not have faced exile or death rather than accept them? Conscience worked so painfully that he could not induce himself to visit the villa which had been presented to him on the death of Britannicus. 'Alas!' he moaned sadly to himself in the watches of the night, 'it is a *viscosum beneficium*, — a kindness smeared with birdlime.'

But the great mass of the Roman world, lying as it did in wickedness, was pleased rather than otherwise to hear of the death — which they all knew to have been the murder — of the son of Claudius. The horrors of the civil wars were still vivid in many recollections, and knowing that rival princes rarely lived in concord, they hailed with satisfaction the bold iniquity which had succeeded in ridding them of a nightmare of the future. The story of the murder of a young and innocent prince, the only son of their late deified Emperor, sounded rather ugly, no doubt; but did not nine-tenths of them expose their own superfluous children? Had not Claudius himself exposed the infant of his wife Petina? And what was death? Was it not a dreamless sleep, which anyone might be glad to exchange for the present state of things, and which many of them would probably seek by suicide?

And why should Nero trouble himself any more about a death which scarcely caused so much as a ripple on the bitter and stagnant pool of Roman society? On the contrary he and all Rome felt a glow of conscious virtue when, a few days later, an order was given to execute a knight, named Antonius, as a poisoner, and publicly to burn his poisons. When Locusta heard that fact she smiled grimly. But what had she to fear?

There was one breast in which the earthquake of excitement, caused by the murder of Britannicus, did not soon subside. Octavia, in the depth of her anguish, had known where to find something of consolation. Not so Agrippina. To her also Nero had offered presents, which she refused with disdainful sullenness. Her soul was full of madness. Was she to be totally defeated by the slight, contemptible son on whom she had built all her hopes?

Not without a struggle would she abandon the power which it had been the object of her life to attain, and the

fabric of which she had with her own hand shattered to the dust.

Suddenly as the Nemesis had come upon her, she would not yet admit herself to be defeated. She was rich; she would be yet richer. She had friends, and she held many a secret interview with them. Octavia might still become in her hands an engine for political purposes, and Agrippina constantly embraced and consoled her. Every tribune and centurion who attended her levées was received with extreme graciousness. She paid her court to all the nobles of high birth and promising ability. She thought that even now it was not too late to create a conspiracy, and put a fitting leader at the head of it.

But all her efforts were broken like foam on the rock of the Emperor's deified autocracy and the unscrupulous wickedness of the favourites by whom he was surrounded. At the suggestion of Otho and Tigellinus, Nero dealt blow after blow at the dignity of his mother. One day she no longer saw the two lictors who attended her litter, and was told that they had been discharged by the Emperor. Soon afterwards she missed the accustomed escort of soldiers who guarded her chambers, and heard with sinking heart that they had been removed. Worst of all, she was suddenly deprived of the body-guard of tall, blue-eyed, fair-haired Germans, to whom she had grown attached, and who were the most splendid outward sign of her imperial station. And, as though all this were not enough, at last the final thunderbolt was launched. She received a message from her son that he had assigned to her, as her residence, the house of his grandmother Antonia. She was dismissed from the Palace in which so many of her years had been spent in order that the courtiers who thronged the audience-hall of the Emperor might have no excuse for paying their respects at the same time to her.

Her feelings, as she left the chambers of the Palatine for a private residence, must be imagined rather than described. Her heart was too dry for tears. She felt humiliated to the very dust, and tasted the bitterness of a thousand deaths. All hope of re-establishing her empire over the heart of her son was gone. Thenceforth he scarcely saw her. If he came to visit her, he came, as though to evidence his distrust, amid a throng of soldiers and centurions, did not speak to

her in private, and departed after a cold, hurried, and formal interview.

She felt how poisonous was the fruit of ambition by which she had been allured. Her power had never been more than the pale reflection of the imperial despotism, and after her breach with Nero it crumbled to ashes.

From that moment she felt that the coloured bubble of her life had burst. Never had she been so wretched. Her exile at Pandataria had been but brief, and she was then young, and she had many schemes on hand, and might hope for immeasurable success. But now her last arrow had sped from the string, and had fallen useless to the ground. The cold shadow of her son's displeasure blighted her whole being. She — in whose honour coins had been struck; in whose name decrees had run; under whose auspices colonies had been founded; to whom kings and governors had once made their appeal, and for whose ambition kingdoms had been too small — suddenly found she was nothing and nobody. Even such a creature as Calvia Crispinilla had more influence, and was more sought after than she. The house of Antonia, in which she lived, was shunned like a lazar-house by all who wished to stand well with Nero. No one visited her, no one consoled her, no one helped to dissipate her weariness. The only exceptions were a few ladies whom she knew too well to trust. They did not come to see her out of affection, but because they hated her, and liked to annoy her with the cold curiosity of an insulting pity. Among these was Junia Silana. In old days she had been a bosom-friend of the Augusta, but the ostensible friendship gave ample opportunity for feline amenities on both sides. Junia had been the wife of the handsome Silius, who had fallen a victim to the love of Messalina. In her early widowhood she had been sought in marriage by Sextius Africanus, but Agrippina, not wishing to see him made too powerful by the ample wealth of the childless Silana, had confidentially dissuaded him from the marriage, by telling him that Silana was a woman of dissolute character, and was now getting on in years. The secret had reached the ears of Silana, and while openly she continued to speak of her 'sweetest and dearest Agrippina,' she vowed an exemplary revenge.

And now that the time seemed ripe, she matured her plans.

It would be useless to trump up the old charges that Agrippina mourned the murder of Britannicus, or spread abroad the wrongs of Octavia. She determined to devise something entirely new, and to charge Agrippina with the design of marrying and forming a conspiracy with Rubellius Plautus, who, like Nero, was, on the mother's side, a great-great-grandson of the deified Augustus. Silana sent two of her freedmen, Iturius and Calvisius, with this intelligence to Atimetus, a freedman of Domitia, Nero's aunt. Atimetus had once been a fellow-slave with Paris. He went to his old friend, and urged him to go at once to Nero, and to denounce the supposed plot with all his consummate vehemence and skill.

The actor was not naturally a villain, but he had been trained in an abominable school, and had erased the words 'ought' and 'ought not' from his vocabulary as completely as most of his contemporaries. That night, at a late hour, he hurried to the Emperor, not in the glittering dress which usually set off his perfect beauty, but in dark and disordered array. His familiarity with Nero procured him at all times a ready entrance into the Palace. He found the Emperor still carousing amid his favourites, and he was received with a burst of welcome by the flushed and full-fed guests.

'Now this is good of you, Paris,' said Nero. 'You alone were wanting to our mirth. Come, brim this crystal vase with our best Falernian, and then let us see a spectacle which would thrill the Muses and the Graces even if Apollo were with them. But — can this be Paris? — our bright, gay, lovely Paris? Why, what is the matter?'

'Matter enough,' said Paris, in such accents of woe, and with such a flood of tears, that the guests could not help weeping with him. 'Dare I speak, Cæsar?'

'Tell us all,' said Nero, raising himself on his elbow in agitation. 'What has happened? Have the legions revolted? Is the prætorium in an uproar?'

'Not yet,' said Paris; 'but — Agrippina —'

'Ha!' said Nero. 'Go on' — for the actor's voice seemed to be speechless with emotion.

'Agrippina — and — Rubellius Plautus —'

Nero was listening with painful interest; and, pretending to recover himself with a great effort, Paris told them the

fictitious plot, and succeeded in rousing the Emperor to such a pitch of terror that he started from his couch and tore his hair.

'Agrippina shall die!' he exclaimed; 'and Rubellius Plautus shall die. Here, give me my tablets. Despatch instant orders for their arrest and execution. And send for Burrus — no! he is the creature of my mother; she made him Prætorian Præfect. My foster-brother Cæcina Tuscus shall command the Prætorians, and Burrus shall die. Quick, quick, send for Seneca; not a moment is to be lost!'

Late as was the hour, one of the centurions on guard was despatched to the Palace of Seneca. He was reading the 'Republic' of Plato to his wife, Paulina, and his friend Fabius Rusticus, after a frugal supper in a modestly furnished room. When the slave announced that he was summoned by soldiers from the Palace, Paulina and Rusticus grew deadly pale; and Seneca, though he strove to conceal his emotion, trembled in every limb. He ordered the centurion to be admitted, and, striving to conceal the agitation of his voice, asked if he knew why the Emperor desired his presence at so late an hour. The centurion did not know, but said that the Emperor seemed to be alarmed about something, and needed the advice of his minister. Seneca demanded his toga, and hastened to the Palace. Nero told him what Paris had disclosed. He did not believe in the reality of the plot, but in those days anything was possible. He, however, pledged his own life on the fidelity of Burrus, and urged the Emperor to summon him into his presence. Burrus came, and listened gravely.

'It is a serious matter,' he said, 'to order the execution of anyone without allowing an opportunity for defence. It would be still more serious to execute without a trial an Augusta, and your own mother.'

'Think again,' said Nero. 'Rubellius Plautus has the blood of the Cæsars in his veins, and my mother is capable of anything to get power.'

'I need not think again,' answered Burrus, bluntly. 'When once I have made up my mind, I do not alter it.'

Nero frowned, but Burrus only added: 'There are no accusers. You are relying on the sole voice of Paris, a freedman of a hostile family, and you have only heard his story

late at night during a drinking bout. Surely the life of even a common citizen ought not to be sworn away so cheaply, much less the life of an Empress.'

Nero, sobered by the gravity of these considerations, still kept a sullen silence; but Burrus would not yield.

'Cæsar, we will examine her at earliest dawn. If we find her guilty she shall die.'

By this time the Emperor's terror had exhausted itself, and he was weary. Agrippina's residence was surrounded with a guard, and at daylight Seneca and Burrus went together to question her. They were accompanied by a number of Nero's most trusted freedmen, who were to report the trial, and to act as spies both on the ministers and the Augusta.

To be summoned from her sleep into such a presence — to see her house surrounded with soldiers — to be aware that some unknown crisis of the utmost gravity was at hand, might well have shaken the strongest nerves. But, in spite of the horror of this unknown mystery, the indomitable woman swept into the presence of the two statesmen with a demeanour not only undaunted, but conspicuously haughty. The soldier and the philosopher rose at her entrance, and the freedmen bowed low. The freedmen she did not deign to notice, but slightly inclined her head as she motioned the two ministers to be seated, and herself sat down on a stately chair covered with purple cushions.

'And now,' she said, 'as this seems to be a solemn audience, I am informed that the Emperor has sent you two, and these other — persons' — glancing at the freedmen — 'to speak with me. What may be my son's pleasure?'

'Augusta,' said Burrus in his sternest tones, 'this is, as you have said, a serious occasion; you are accused of nothing short of high treason.'

The charge in days like those was awful enough to have forced back the blood into her heart, and for one instant she felt as if the solid earth were about to yawn beneath her feet. But in that instant she rallied all the forces of her nature. She looked, indeed, pale as a statue, but not the faintest tremor was perceptible in her accents as she exclaimed in a tone of the most freezing irony, —

'Indeed? *I* am accused? and of high treason?'

'You are accused,' said Burrus, 'of desiring to form a party

among the legionaries to raise Rubellius Plautus to the throne and then to marry him.'

Agrippina's only answer was a scornful laugh.

'Poor Rubellius Plautus! an innocent philosopher who lives in retirement.'

'You will find it no matter for laughter. The Emperor is seriously alarmed,' said Burrus.

'I have no other answer to an accusation so ridiculous.'

'The Augusta has not been so careful as she might have been,' said Seneca, in his mildest manner. 'Those frequent secret meetings with her friends; that courting of senators of influence; those attentions to military personages; those open complaints about the children of Claudius, have aroused suspicion.'

Agrippina turned upon the speaker her flashing glance, and he quailed beneath it. 'Is this your philosophic gratitude?' she said. 'But for me, you might have been dying of malaria in Corsica; and you, Burrus, might have remained a tenth-rate tribune.'

'We are but obeying the Emperor's behests,' said Burrus, in a less threatening tone.

'And, pray, who are my accusers?'

'Late last night this charge was laid before the Emperor by Paris —'

'By Paris!' said Agrippina, in tones of crushing scorn. 'Paris is an actor, a buffoon, a pantomime, a thing of infamy whom I scarcely brook to name. Pray, go on.'

'He had been sent by Atimetus, the freedman of Domitia.'

'Domitia — and her slave concubine!' said Agrippina. 'Of him I deign no word; but she — what has she been doing all these years? While I was arranging the adoption of Nero, his marriage with Octavia, his promotion to the proconsular dignity, his nomination as a future Consul, all that led to his imperial elevation — what was *she* doing? Improving her fishponds! And now she wants to rob me of my Nero, and for that purpose gets up a pantomime with her paramour and her dancer! Pray, is that all?'

'The sources of the information were Iturius and Calvisius.'

'Iturius and Calvisius! — ex-slaves, spendthrifts, debauchees, the scum of the earth, who want to repair their squalid bankruptcies by the gain of turning informers. They

are nobodies; poor pieces on the draughts-board. Who moved them?'

'Junia Silana.'

'Junia Silana! Ah! now I understand it all — the whole vile plot from beginning to end! Silana — false wife, false friend, evil woman — what does she know of the sacredness of motherhood? Children cannot be got rid of by their mother so easily as lovers are by an adulteress. So! I am to be branded with the fictitious infamy of parricide, and Nero with its actual guilt, that two broken-down freedmen may repay their debts to the old woman their mistress?

'And you, sirs,' she said, raising herself to the full height of her stature, 'ought you not to blush for the sorry part you have played? Instead of repaying me the gratitude which you owe to one who recalled you, Seneca, from your disgraceful exile, and raised you, Burrus, from the dust — instead of making the Emperor ashamed of attaching a feather's-weight of importance to this paralytic comedy of pantomimes, scoundrels, and rancorous old women — you have encouraged him to try and humiliate me! I am ashamed of you,' she cried, with the imperious gesture which had often made bold men tremble; 'for as for these — gentlemen' — and she glanced at the freedmen — 'they, of course, must do as they are bid. And so, *such* are my accusers! Who will bear witness that I have ever tampered with the city cohorts? who that I have intrigued in the provinces? who that I have bribed one slave or one freedman? They charge me with mourning for the death of Britannicus. Why, had Britannicus become emperor, whose head would have fallen sooner than that of his mother's enemy and his own? And Rubellius Plautus — if he were emperor — would he be able for a single month to protect me from accusers who, alas! would be able to charge me, not with the incautious freedom of a mother's indignant utterance, but with deeds from which I can be absolved by no one but that son for whose sake they were committed.'

For one moment her nature broke down under the rush of her emotion, and her glowing cheek was bathed in tears; but, recovering herself before she could dash the tears aside, she repudiated the awkward attempts at consolation offered by her judges, who themselves were deeply moved.

'Enough!' she said. 'Sirs, I have done with you. By the claims of the innocent and the calumniated, if not by the rights of a mother, I demand an interview with my son this very day — this very hour.'

While yet the two ministers, and even the freedmen — in spite of the open scorn which she had manifested towards them — were under the spell of her powerful ascendency, they declared to Nero her complete innocence of the charges laid against her. Relieved from his alarm, Nero came to her. Receiving him with calm dignity, she said not a word about her innocence, which she chose to assume as a matter of course; not a word about the gratitude which he owed to her, lest she should seem to be casting it in his teeth. She only begged for rewards for her friends, and the punishment of her defeated adversaries. Nero was unable to resist her demands. Silana was banished from Italy; Calvisius and Iturius were expelled from Rome; Atimetus was executed. Paris alone was spared, because he was too dear to the Emperor to permit of his being punished. The men for whom Agrippina asked favours were men of honour. Fænius Rufus was made commissioner of the corn market; Arruntius Stella was made superintendent of the games which Nero was preparing to exhibit; the learned Balbillus was made governor of Egypt. Nero was intensely jealous of Rubellius Plautus, but his hour had not yet come.

It was the last flash of Agrippina's dying power, and it encouraged a few to visit her once more. One or two independent senators, pitying her misfortunes, came to salute her, and some of the Roman matrons. Yet among these women there was not one whom she could either respect or trust. She had sinned so deeply in her days of power that women like the younger Arria, wife of Pætus Thrasea, and Servilia, the daughter of Barea Soranus, and Sextia, the mother of Antistius Vetus, held aloof from her. Paulina, the wife of Seneca, cordially disliked her, and the Vestal Virgins had never lent her the countenance of their private friendship.

But one noble lady came to her, who had never paid her the least court in the days of her splendour. It was Pomponia Græcina. She came on the evening of that memorable trial, and found the Empress prostrate with the reaction which followed the tumultuous passion of the scenes through which

she had passed. She lay on her couch an object for even her enemies to pity. The strong, imperial, ambitious princess was utterly broken down in her — only the weeping, broken-hearted woman remained. In spite of her apparent victory, her life, and all its aims, and all it held dear, lay in ruins around her. Even hope was gone. What remained for her but remorse, and anguish, and the cup of humiliation, and the agonising recollection of a brilliant past which she had herself destroyed? There were no loyal friends around her. No children's faces smiled upon her. There was no brother, or sister, or daughter to comfort her. Those to whom she had been a benefactress either felt no gratitude, or did not dare to show it, or deemed that she had forfeited it by crimes. Homeless, desolate, unloved, left like a stranded wreck by the ebbing tide upon a naked shore, she lay there weeping like a child. Oh! that she had been innocent, like her own mother — like one or two whom she had known; — but, alas! she could only look back upon a life of guilt, flecked here and there with blood which nothing could wash out. And now the Retribution which she had doubted and defied — the Retribution which had been stealing with silent footstep behind her — had broken upon her crowned with fire, and had smitten her into the dust with a blow from which she never could uprise.

And while her head burned and throbbed, and her veins seemed to be full of liquid flame, and ghosts of those who had perished by her machinations glimmered upon her haunted imagination in the deepening gloom, her lady in waiting, Acerronia, came to announce a visitor.

'Did I not say that I would see no one else to-day?' said Agrippina, wearily. 'I am worn out, and fain would sleep.'

'It is Pomponia Græcina. She told the janitor that though you might not see others who belong to the Court, perhaps you would see her.'

'Yes; I will see *her*. She is not like the rest of them. She is sincere, and her presence is like balm.'

Pomponia entered, and could scarcely believe that the lady who lay there, with her dress disregarded, her face haggard and stricken, her eyes dim, her cheeks stained with tears, her hair dishevelled, and, as Pomponia thought,

of a perceptibly greyer tinge than when she had seen her last — was indeed the once magnificent and all-powerful Augusta.

An impulse of pity overcame her, and she knelt down by the couch of the unhappy Empress, who pressed her fevered lips to her cheeks, and then wept uncontrollably with her head on Pomponia's shoulder.

The two ladies presented a strange contrast, not only in their dress, but in their entire aspect. Agrippina was still arrayed in the magnificent robes in which she had received her son, and which, irksome as they were, she had been too weary to lay aside. Pomponia was in the dark mourning dress which she had worn for so many years since the death of the friend of her childhood, Julia, the grand-daughter of Tiberius and mother of Rubellius Plautus. The tresses of Agrippina, though disarranged, showed the elaborate care of the ornatrix. Pomponia wore her dark hair, now beginning to silver, in the simplest bands, and without an ornament. But the chief difference was in their faces. Pride and cruel determination, as well as calamity, had left their marks on the noble lineaments of the daughter of Germanicus; over the calm face of the wife of Plautius it was evident that the shadows of many a sorrow had been cast, but the sorrow was irradiated by hope and gladness, and in her eyes was the sweet light of the Peace of God.

'Augusta,' she said, 'I have come to congratulate you on the defeat of a nefarious conspiracy. I thought I should find you happier after many trials. Pardon me if I have thrust myself too presumptuously upon your sorrow.'

'Not so,' said Agrippina. 'You are always welcome; and more so now than ever. You sought me not in my hour of prosperity. No one would come to me in my hour of ruin who did not wish me well.'

'It is not, I trust, an hour of ruin. The plot against you has been ignominiously defeated. You may have many happy days in store.'

'Nay, Pomponia; happiness can never be linked again with the name of Agrippina. It is a dream. I did not find it in the days of my splendour; it is little likely that I should find it when all desert me and I am brought low. I know no one

who is happy. We are the slaves and playthings of a horrible destiny, which is blind and pitiless and irresistible. Are you happy?'

'Yes, Augusta, I am happy, though hardly, perhaps, in the sense you mean. To me, as to all of us, life has brought bitter trials. These dark robes tell of the loss of one whom I loved as my own soul, and even at this moment I am threatened with terrible calamity — perhaps with exile, perhaps with death. On all sides, there are terrors and anxieties, and the state of society seems to portend catastrophe and the vengeance of heaven, for wickedness can hardly go to any greater lengths than now. Yet I am happy.'

'Oh, that you would give me your secret!' said the Empress. 'I can read character; I can detect the accents of sincerity. These words of yours are no pompous and hollow Stoic paradox.'

Pomponia hesitated. The woman before her was, as she well knew, steeped in crime from her childhood. Of what avail would it be, without any of the evangelic preparation, to tell her of Jesus and the Resurrection? Could there be the remotest possibility of exciting in her mind anything but contempt by telling her at that moment of the Cross which was to the Romans something between a horror and a jest?

'Agrippina,' she answered, 'the day may come when I may tell you more of the strange secret. It is not mine only; it is meant for all the world. But it cannot be attained, it cannot be approached, without humility and repentance for wrong-doing, and the love of virtue, and of something higher than virtue, and the lifting to heaven of holy hands.'

'Alas!' said Agrippina; 'you speak to me in a strange language. The Greek tragedians are always telling us that when blood has fallen to the ground it has fallen for ever. Can wrong be atoned for? Can guilt be washed away?'

'It can,' said Pomponia, gently; and she longed to speak the words which lingered in her memory from the letter of Peter of Bethsaida — 'Redeemed . . . with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ.' But to Agrippina they would at that time have been simply meaningless.

'I have heard of the mysteries,' said the Empress, 'and of

the taurobolies. Would it be of any avail if I too were to crouch in a hollow, and let the blood of a bull which has been sacrificed to the gods drop over me?'

'It would not,' said Pomponia. 'God does not require of us things so revolting, nor any mere external ceremonies and superstitions. What that sacred and supreme Majesty requires of us is innocence alone.[1] Can you not pray to Him, Augusta? You have read Homer, and you know how the old poet sings about *Atè*, and the *Litai*, the Prayers which follow in her path.'

'Atè? Ah! I know that fearful deity,' groaned Agrippina. 'She is the Fury Megæra. I have seen her petrifying face turned towards me. She is the Harpy Celæno. I have often heard her in the banquet-halls of the Palatine, and thought of Phineus and his polluted feasts. But the Prayers — will you not repeat me the lines, Pomponia?'

Pomponia repeated the famous lines of the old bard of Chios: —

> 'The gods (the only great and only wise)
> Are mov'd by offerings, vows, and sacrifice;
> Offending man their high commission wins,
> And daily prayers atone for daily sins.
> Prayers are Jove's daughters of celestial race,
> Lame are their feet, and wrinkled is their face;
> With humble mien, and with dejected eyes
> Constant they follow, where Injustice flies.
> Who hears these daughters of almighty Jove,
> For him they mediate to the throne above;
> When man rejects the humble suit they make
> The Sire revenges for the daughters' sake.'[2]

'Alas! they have been strangers to me, those Prayers,' said Agrippina; 'and though you have spoken truth to me, I see that you have not told me all.'

'There are times for all things,' said Pomponia, as she rose to leave; 'and perhaps, if you will think of what we have said, the day may come when you will be able to bear more. Farewell, Augusta; you need rest and quiet. Pardon me if I have wearied you.'

'Farewell, Pomponia,' said the Empress; 'you are good and true. Your words have been to me as soft and pure as the falling snow. I know not whether the Litai of whom Homer speaks may plead for us through another.'

1 Lactantius.

2 *Il.* ix. 502 (Pope).

'They may.'

'Then will you ask them to say something which may avert the fury of Atè from one who, to you, is not ashamed to confess that she is wretched above all women?'

'May you find peace!' murmured the noble lady, as the Empress once more kissed her, and pressed her to her heart. 'All may find it who seek it rightly from the Heavenly Powers.'

CHAPTER XXX

A PRIVATE TRIAL

'Tanto vogl' io che vi sia manifesto,
Pur che mia coscïenza non mi garra,
Che alla fortuna, come vuol, son presto.'
DANTE, *Inf.* xv. 91–93.

POMPONIA had incidentally mentioned to Agrippina that she was threatened by a calamity, and it was indeed a serious one. It was strange that one so retired in her mode of life, and so entirely free from rancour and malice, should yet have been the butt of calumny. Yet such was the case. It was the tribute which vice paid to virtue. The base mob of Roman matrons avenged themselves on the chaste wife of the conqueror of Britain for the involuntary shame which they felt as they contrasted her life with theirs. Her constancy; her silence amid the universal buzz and roar of gossip and spite; her aloofness from the cliques and coteries of a scandalous society; her love of good works; her discountenance of their loose talk and complicated intrigues; her absence from the games and theatres; the simplicity of her dress, her home, her manners, her hospitality; the calmness of her temper, and even the sort of sacred beauty on which time seemed to make no impression, made her an object of hatred to the Calvia Crispinillas and the Ælia Catellas of the capital. Her presence among them was like a perpetual reproach, and they determined, if possible, to get rid of her. They would have said of her what the wicked say of the righteous in the Book of Wisdom, that they would lie in wait for her, because she was 'clean contrary to their doings, and objected to their infamy.'

But how was it to be done? Would it not be easy to set an informer to work? Pomponia was wealthy, and since an informer got a grant of a fourth part of the property of any one who was condemned on his accusation, there were men who

sat watching for their opportunity like a crowd of obscene and greedy vultures. Aulus Plautius was a person of distinction, and it might be dangerous to offend him; but if an informer of the front rank, like the eloquent Eprius Marcellus, could not be induced to undertake the risk, surely they might secure the services of a Veiento, a Messallinus, or a Regulus. And as for corroborative evidence of any charge, they thought that it could be obtained with the utmost ease among the herd of dehumanised slaves who thronged every considerable house. If they could not witness to facts, they were first-rate hands at inventing fictions. If the masters were a terror to their slaves, a slave might any day become a terror to an obnoxious master. It was personally disagreeable to tremble before beings who seemed so abject, but there was some convenience in having such agents at hand for the ruin of an enemy.

But what charge could be brought against a lady so blameless as Pomponia? To accuse her of conspiracy, or poisoning, or magic, would sound too preposterous; and it would be impossible to find against her the sort of evidence of evil manners which had amply sufficed in old and even in recent days to confound a lady who was disliked. The question was carefully discussed in a secret meeting of some of the worst beldames of social distinction, and as it was clear that Pomponia took no part in the public religious ceremonies, they agreed to get her charged with being guilty of 'a foreign superstition.'

The wretches whose business it was to work up a case of this kind, and who were largely bribed to enable them to carry out their designs, began secretly to worm their way on various pretexts into the household of Plautius. Their success was smaller than their hopes. They found that there was some peculiar element in that *familia*. Many of the slaves and the few chief freedmen were Christians, but the secret was faithfully kept. Danger made them vigilant, and they had been carefully selected for worth and character. The female slaves, without exception, were devoted to a mistress who never addressed to them an unkind word, and who made their lives a paradise of happiness when compared with those who attended the toilettes of pagan ladies. The male slaves were no less

faithful to the heads of a household in which they were treated with generosity and consideration. The spies of the informers could scarcely find a slave in the whole family whom they could tempt to drunkenness and indiscreet babbling. All that they could learn from the gossip of the least worthy was that Pomponia did not burn incense in the Lararium, or attend the temples. The informers had to content themselves with these meagre facts, trusting to perjury and invention to do the rest. Regulus undertook the case. The sound of his name was sufficient to strike a chill into an innocent and honest heart, and feeling certain of success, or, at the worst, of impunity, he laid before the Emperor a public information that Pomponia Græcina was the guilty votary of a foreign superstition.

The friends and relatives of Pomponia had heard rumours that some attack of the kind was in contemplation; but in the days of the Empire such rumours were rife, and they often came to nothing. When the charge was published they were filled with consternation. They knew that it mattered very little whether it was true or false. The result would turn on the influences which had been brought to bear on Nero. If Nero favoured the prosecution, Pomponia might be as innocent as a new-born child, yet it was certain that she would be condemned. One could commit no fault so slight but what Cæsar's house might be mixed up with it. Had not Julius Græcinus been put to death under Gaius simply because he was too honest a man? Were not the wretched little islets of Gyara and Tremerus crowded with illustrious and innocent exiles? If beauty and wealth and imperial blood had not saved the two Julias, or the two Agrippinas, what should save a lady so alien from the common interests of Roman society as the wife of Plautius?

One thing saved her.

Nothing had been more remote from her mind than any thought of self-interest when she visited Agrippina. She had gone to see her chiefly because she knew that the threshold, once thronged with suitors and applicants, had now become so solitary, and because an habitual sense of pity drew her to the side of the unfortunate. Her sole object had been, if possible to bring a little peace and consolation to a sister-woman, whose dejection and misery could only be measured

by the height from which she had fallen. True that Agrippina was guilty. True that every law of the moral world must have been violated if impunity were granted her as the sequel of so many and such various crimes. But there was nothing Pharisaic in Pomponia's heart. Familiar with sorrow, she was sensitive to the influence of compassion, and she had learnt from the lips of Christian teachers that there may be recovery and forgiveness even for the most fallen. She had gone to the Empress with no desire but to speak gentle and healing words.

Yet it was that little unnoticed impulse of natural kindness and Christian charity which saved her fortunes, perhaps even her life.

For Regulus was rich, eloquent, unscrupulous, formidable; and Nero was intensely timid and suspicious. The notion of a 'foreign superstition' was mixed up with that of magic; and magic was supposed to be chiefly practised for treasonable ends. If a panic were created in Nero's mind, it was certain that the feeble Senate would interpose no barrier to his suggestions of punishment.

But at the moment of consternation in the heart of Pomponia's friends, Agrippina did one of the few good deeds of her unhappy life. Availing herself of the momentary resuscitation of her influence, she no sooner heard of the information laid against Pomponia, than she wrote a letter to the Emperor strongly urging the innocence and goodness of the wife of Plautius, and entreating him not to stain with a deed of needless injustice the annals of his rule. Nero was struck with his mother's letter, and with the fact that she should have taken the trouble to intercede for one who had never pretended to pay court to her, and whose character was the antithesis of her own. Octavia also ventured to say a few words of pleading earnestness for her friend. Nero had as yet no grudge, either against Pomponia, whose sombre robe was rarely visible in the Palace, or against her brave, loyal, and simple-minded husband. On the other hand, he did not like to check the activity of the informers. Domitian said in after years, 'The prince who does not check informers, encourages them.' Nero did not dream of checking them. Seneca, who was a friend of Plautius, and who had been grieved by the news of this attack upon one whom he and the ladies of his

family highly esteemed, suggested to Nero a way out of the difficulty. 'Follow,' he said, 'the ancient custom, and permit Pomponia to be tried at home by her husband, relatives, and friends.'

The Emperor accepted the suggestion, and the meeting of the domestic tribunal was fixed to take place on the next nundine. When Pomponia was told of the Emperor's decision, she felt that her prayers had been heard, and that her pardon was secured, although it was not impossible that the trial might elicit painful secrets, which, for the sake of others, she thought it her duty to conceal.

She asked Seneca himself to undertake her defence, and he gladly assumed the task. Plautius sat in his own atrium, and had summoned only those of his family whom he could trust. The evidence on which the informers and their patrons relied was slight and negative, and Seneca had no difficulty in tearing it to pieces. To the intense relief and heartfelt gratitude of Pomponia, she was not definitely charged with being a Christian. Indeed, that specific charge could hardly be urged, because no proof was forthcoming. Regulus skilfully made the most of old precedents. He told how, nearly a hundred years ago, the Senate had decreed the destruction of the Temples of Isis and Serapis (B. C. 46), and how Æmilius Paulus had been the first to shatter the doors with an axe. He mentioned the stern dealings with the Bacchanalians (B. C. 186). He told how (B. C. 139) the priests of Sabazius had been driven from Rome. Referring to the days of the Empire, he mentioned the edict of Claudius against the Jews, and reminded Aulus that Tiberius had banished four thousand Jews to Sardinia. He appealed triumphantly to the old law of the Twelve Tables, 'Let no one separately worship foreign gods.' When the accusers had mentioned every unfavourable circumstance, and when, on the other hand, an abundance of testimony had been elicited to prove the habitual purity and blamelessness of Pomponia's life, Seneca rose to argue for her honourable acquittal.

'What was meant,' he asked, 'by a "foreign superstition"? Was the worship of Isis a foreign superstition? Was the worship of the Pessinuntian Cybele a foreign superstition? Was the worship of Iaô — if that were the secret name of the deity — by the Jews a foreign superstition? The State was

entirely unconcerned with any of these private beliefs. When, indeed, the votaries of any strange cult were guilty of riotous, licentious, and dishonest conduct, they were justly punished. Referring to the precedents quoted by Regulus, he said that the priests of Isis had deserved the vengeance which fell upon them for having betrayed the stupid credulity of a Roman lady. The Jews, who had been guilty of cheating and embezzlement in the matter of purple hangings for the Temple, were rightly punished. Claudius had been justified in driving all the Jews from Rome when they made tumults at the instigation of one Chrestus; but on the other hand, Julius Cæsar had always been favourable to the Jews, and Augustus had by public edict protected their Sabbath. The priests of the Syrian goddess were for the most part worthless vagabonds, and no one was sorry when they were detected and executed for their nefarious practices. The State took no cognisance of opinions, but only of evil practices. A Roman matron, by way of supposed purification, had gone down to the wintry Tiber, had broken the ice, had plunged into the freezing waters, and had crawled across the Campus Martius with bleeding knees. In such acts we might see the workings of a foreign superstitution; but of no such act — of no secret visit to the base temple of Serapis — of no dealings with the mutilated priests of Cybele — of no lightings of lamps at Jewish festivals, had Pomponia been guilty. And who, he asked, can allege one immoral deed, one malefic practice against the noble wife of the conqueror of Britain? Is it to her discredit that she differs from so many of the noble ladies in Rome? Do we blame her or rather admire her, that she has never betrayed a friend, or changed a husband, or exposed an infant, or plundered a province, or ruined a reputation? Is it to be her destruction that her life has ever been simple, and her words sincere? Or is she to be banished because, through long years, she has continued to mourn for a friend, when so many forget their dearest relatives in less than a month? Cicero mourned the death of a slave, though he was half ashamed of his sensibility; Crassus wept for the death of a favourite lamprey. Is it a crime to cherish a beloved memory? What evidence is there against Pomponia? Have not her slaves, though Regulus has tampered with them, shown themselves entirely faithful? And what wonder?

Most of us treat our slaves as though they were enemies — as though they could not claim the rights of human beings. She has treated her slaves as men and women like ourselves; as sharers of her home; as heirs with her of the common slavery of life and death. She has asked their aid; she has admitted them to festive tables; she has sought their love, and not their fear. She has lived, as we should all live, like a member of one great brotherhood, of which all are bound to mutual assistance. She has done good in secret. In the midst of wealth she has been as one who is poor. She has stretched her hand to the shipwrecked; shown his path to the wanderer; divided her bread with the hungry; and has been, as so few are, a friend to the distressed.

'But she does not go to the theatre! Is that to be accounted a crime? Rather let us erect a statue to a virtue which can still blush for infamies at which so many women dare to be spectators. Is the licence of the Fescennines, and the grossness of the Atellan plays, acted by slaves whom the ancient laws branded with shame, a fit amusement for pure matrons? If these be deemed tolerable, what shall be said of the softer luxury, the subtler indecency, the more fascinating corruption of the modern mimes? Instead of blaming Pomponia for not patronising such spectacles, let us commend her example!

'Or is it a sign of moroseness and alienation from the customs of her country, that she is never to be seen among the multitudes of every rank and age who gaze with frenzied delight at the gladiatorial shows? Nay, she is to be applauded for shunning scenes so fatal to true morality! It is shocking enough to see noble beasts ruthlessly mangled, and once, at least, a cry of compassion has risen from the dense throngs when they saw that frightful combat between five hundred Gætulians and twenty elephants. But their compassion was for the elephants![1] How much deeper is the compassion due to the unhappy human beings whose carcases encrimson the white sands of the amphitheatre! Augustus tried to check and limit this savagery. To see men torn by wild beasts in the morning, and hacking each other to pieces in the afternoon — and that as a mere amusement, to kill the time — is simply degrading, however much custom may

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* viii. 7.

sanction it. It is true that Cicero invented an excuse for this brutality of pleasure, this delirium of homicide, by the absurd plea that it stimulated courage. The courage of the tiger, which leaps with bare breast on the hunter's steel, exists in the lowest of the human race, without the need for this bloody stimulus. Man should be to man a sacred thing; the only result of gazing at such scenes is to destroy this generous sense of a common humanity. It may be said that the gladiators, or those who fight the wild beasts, are often criminals. Be it so; but are *we* criminals also? If not, why should we condemn ourselves to the shame of gloating over the supreme agony and mystery of death?

'But Pomponia is charged with speaking as though there were but one God. Well, do we not read even in the sacred poems of Orpheus —

'"One God, one Hades, one Sun, and one Dionysus?"

Does not Varro, one of the most honoured of Roman writers, distinguish carefully between the mythology of poets, the religion of the commonwealth, and the beliefs of philosophers? It is true that he deprecated the revelation of these truths to the multitude, because there is no way to keep them in order but by illusions. Yet scarcely an old woman or beardless boy in Rome really believes in these fables; and it is a good thing that they do not. If they attached genuine credence to the supposed deeds of this rabble of gods, they would have patrons and examples of every lust and of every crime. But they are dimly aware that Stator, Liber, Hercules, Mercury, are but names or manifestations of one Divine Existence. The mysteries are divulged; the oracles are dumb; and as the wailing spirits cried to Epitherses thirty years ago as he sailed past the promontory of Paludes, "Great Pan is dead." [1]

'A person, then, who can regard it as criminal to reject the popular belief must be ignorant of all philosophy and all literature. Is any one bound to suppose that there really is such a god as Panic; or such goddesses as Muta, Febris, and Strenia? Are the Greek poets to be condemned who have repeatedly spoken of one God? God is everywhere. He is that without which nothing is. He comes to men; He comes

[1] Plutarch, *De Defect. Orac.* p. 419, *b*.

into men. No one is good without God. Pomponia's character alone is sufficient to prove that there is nothing harmful in her belief. To the God who is near us, to the sacred Spirit who dwells with us, the observer and guardian of all our evil and our good, she has been supremely true. The image of the gods cannot be formed with gold and silver, or such materials, but with the beauty and dignity of human souls. God is best worshipped, not by sacrifices of bulls, but by innocence and rectitude.

'And you, O Aulus, you know what a wife Pomponia has been to you, how chaste, how gentle, how faithful! How often have you found her quietly spinning wool among her modest maidens, when other matrons are sitting at riotous banquets, or gazing at dishonourable scenes! How wisely and quietly has she managed your fortunes, and governed your family! How true and tender she was as a mother to the little boy whose immature death you wept, whose ashes are inurned in the tomb of your house! How purely has she trained your youthful Aulus! To whom save to her does he owe that beautiful mixture of manly courage and virginal modesty which distinguishes him among the youth of Rome? And will you, at the word of a vile informer actuated by base greed, and set on by female rancour — will you desecrate the shrine of your own household gods? Will you dishonour the fame of your ancestors? Will you sever a union which has been to you so fruitful of blessings? Remember how she smiled on you on the day that you walked in proud ovation with Cæsar by your side! Remember how she shared the toils, the hardships, the anxieties of your campaigns in that far-off Thule, which was subdued by your valour! Remember how by her sympathy she has diminished all your troubles, and intensified all your joys! And will you hand over such a wife, and such a mother — so gentle, so pure, so noble — to the fury of the executioner? Will you see the sword flash down upon a head which has often rested on your breast? Or will you coldly and sternly dismiss your innocent and well-loved wife to end her days on some dreary island-rock, amid the storms of Adria or the Tyrrhene Sea? Yours, O Aulus, yours and not hers, will be the infamy; yours, not hers, will be the loss! Not hers the shame — for no informer, and no unjust condemnation can fix a stain upon

the guiltless; not hers the misery — for wherever she goes she will carry the God within her, since in each one of us, as our great poet says,

> '"Some god is dwelling, though we know not who."

You may banish her to Pontia or Pandataria, but everywhere she will see the sunlight and the stars, and will feel that she is not abandoned. When we enter a dense forest, we are struck with awe at its huge tree-trunks, its spreading boughs, its dark shade, and we feel that the Divine is there; when we enter some cavern in the hills, we feel the presence of a Deity: but we feel it much more when we see a brave and pure soul rising superior to the menaces of calamity. Look at her, Aulus, where she sits. In her calmness, in her fortitude, in the serene and tranquil beauty of a countenance on which no vice has set its mark, see the living proof of her freedom from all blame! Proclaim to Cæsar, to Regulus, to the society of Rome, to all the world, that Pomponia has done or thought nothing unworthy of the immortal gods, nothing unworthy of her ancestors, of her husband, and of her home!'

Many a cry of applause had greeted Seneca, as he thus ventured to pour forth, in the secrecy of a domestic tribunal, the thoughts which he had often uttered to his friends, and even published in his writings. He sat down amid a murmur of admiration, during which not a few of the noblest of his auditors pressed round him with expressions of warmest congratulation, and Amplias, the Christian freedman of Pomponia, in a burst of enthusiasm, bent down and kissed his hand. He was deeply gratified by the impression he had made, for when there was nothing to arouse his fear or imperil his ambition, he felt a genuine happiness in doing deeds of kindness. But he raised his hands for silence while the assembly awaited the decision of those whom Plautius had asked to be his assessors in the judgment.

They consulted together for a few moments, and then, amid the deepest silence, Plautius rose. He was almost too much moved to speak. It required all his Roman firmness and dignity to force back the tears which were brimming in his eyes, and to control into steadiness the voice which seemed ready to break; but he succeeded. Rising with dignity, he said:

'Friends and kinsmen, I have consulted with those who have shared with me the responsibility of judgment. We are agreed. The evidence is altogether worthless. Pomponia is innocent of anything hostile to religion, or forbidden by the laws of Rome. Friends and kinsmen, I thank you for your presence and your counsel, and I thank you most of all, illustrious Seneca. I thank the Emperor, that he has spared us the pain and anxiety of a public trial, and I shall announce to him, and to all Rome, that Aulus Plautius will thank the gods, even till death, that they have given him a wife so innocent, so noble, and so chaste.'

Pomponia raised her eyes and her clasped hands to heaven in a transport of gratitude, and as she did so a sudden burst of sunshine streamed through the window, and glorified her face. The lambent flame played over her hair, and lit up her features, and gave to her calm beauty a heavenly radiance. This was regarded as a complete justification of the sentence of acquittal, and a visible proof of the divine favour. The hall resounded with acclamations, and Claudia, who had been among the witnesses of the scene, flung herself into the arms of Pomponia, who tenderly folded the fair British maiden to her heart, while Pudens looked on with a happy smile.

And when Pomponia retired to her own room, she knelt down, and with bowed head, and clasped hands, and outstretched arms, poured out her thanks to Him who had been her protector in this most painful trial of her life. She was a confessor and a martyr, in will if not in deed; for though she had not been called upon to declare herself a Christian, she had been prepared to do so if the question had been put to her. When Plautius entered he found her praying, and as she rose at his entrance he saw upon her features a beauty even brighter than that which she had caught from the sunbeam which had shone upon her in the hall.

'My wife,' he said to her very tenderly, as he kissed her. 'I know not what to think of thy beliefs. Thou hast not concealed from *me* that thou art of this new sect. I know that men call it despicable and execrated; but if it makes its votaries such as thou art, it is more blessed and more potent than the worship of the gods of Rome.'

'My Aulus,' she answered, 'I know well that as yet thou canst not think with me. Yet thou, too, art dear to God, for

thou hast felt after Him if haply thou mightest find Him. Our teachers say that He is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that seeketh Him and doeth righteousness, as thou dost, is accepted of Him. Fear not, my husband; in the next world, as in this, we shall be united, for thou art not far from the kingdom of heaven.'

CHAPTER XXXI

THE INTERIOR OF A SLAVE-PRISON

Magnam rem sine dubio fecerimus si servulum infelicem in ergastulum miserimus.' — SENECA, *De Ira*, iii. 32.

WE left Onesimus in a prison cell among the substructions of the Palatine, his back sore with scourging, his soul torn with shame and indignation. He cursed his folly, without repenting of his faults. Once more he had thrown away every element of prosperity; and his manner of looking on life was so entirely selfish that the source of his self-reproach was rather the shipwreck of his chances than the moral instability which had led to it. No news reached him in his prison. It was not till his liberation that he learnt the fate of Britannicus — a fate which, if he had continued steadfast in duty, he might have averted or delayed.

He knew that he could not be restored to his trusted position as the *servus a purpura* of the Empress. He would lose that, and with it lose all the flattery and gain which accrued so easily to the higher slaves of Cæsar's household. He doubted whether even Acte's influence could screen him from the consequences of an offence so deadly as misconduct in the august presence of the imperial divinity. But he felt a desperate pride and a morbid shame which made him determine to conceal all traces of himself and his misdemeanour from Acte's knowledge.

His behaviour in prison was refractory, for the jailer had taken a strong dislike to him, and delighted to humiliate this bird of finer feather more than those who usually came under his charge. He was quite safe in doing so. There was little compassion in the breast of the steward who managed the slaves, and rarely, if ever, did he take the trouble to inquire how a prisoner was getting on, or whether he was alive or dead. Amid blows and insults the heavy days dragged on, and

seemed interminable to the poor Phrygian youth. In the desperation of idleness he tried to find some amusement from scribbling with a nail on the plaster wall of his dungeon, and one day, thinking of the drunken bout which had reduced him to this level, he defiantly scrawled 'When I am set free, I will drain every wine-jar in the house.' [1]

'Will you?' said the jailer, who had entered unobserved as he finished his scrawl. 'You won't have a chance just yet, my fine friend.'

He gave Onesimus a blow with his whip, which made him writhe with anguish, and said, 'Thank Anubis, I shall be rid of you to-day. You are sent to the slave-prison (*ergastulum*).'

'Who sends me?' asked Onesimus shuddering.

'What's that to you, *crucisalus?*' said the jailer, dealing him another blow. 'Oh you writhe, do you, my fine bird? What will you do when the bulls' hides rattle the *cottabus* on your shoulders?'

What he said was true. That evening Onesimus was loaded with fetters and taken into the country.

The sight of slaves in chains being hurried off to punishment was far too familiar to excite much notice in the streets of Rome, but it was torture to Onesimus to be thus exposed to the gaze and jeers of idle passers-by. He felt a painful dread lest any of his friends — above all, lest Acte, or Pudens, or Titus, or Junia — should see him in this wretched and disgraceful guise. No one, however, saw him, and that evening he was safely lodged in the slave-jail attached to Nero's villa at Antium.

The slave-jail was a perfect hell on earth. It presented the spectacle of human beings in their worst aspect, entirely dehumanised by despair and misery. The slaves who were imprisoned there were treated like wild beasts, and became no better than wild beasts, with less of rage but more of malice and foulness. They worked in chains, and were driven to work with scourges. Torture and starvation were the sole methods of government. They were a herd of wretches clothed in rags, ill-fed, untended, unpitied, passing their days and nights under filthy conditions and in pestilential air, hateful and hating one another. Some of them

[1] An actual ancient *graffito* of some imprisoned slave.

were men half mad and wholly untameable, who could not be depended upon except so far as they were coerced by violence. Others were pure barbarians, only speaking a few words of any intelligible language, and therefore useless in a town *familia*. Others were criminals only exempted from death because of the value of their labour. Some of them knew that there was little chance of their being taken thence, unless it were to be crucified, and that when death released them, their bodies would be carelessly flung to rot amid the seething abominations of the corpse-pits (*puticuli*) like that which Onesimus had once seen in Rome near the Esquiline hill.

The only slaves who retained any vestige of decency and self-respect in these seething masses of human misery and degradation, were those who found themselves denizens of an *ergastulum* for a short period, at the caprice of a master or mistress. The experience was so terrible that it cowed the most contumacious into trembling servility. A few came there for no real fault, who were far less guilty of any misdoing than the owners who subjected them to this dreaded punishment. Sometimes a page or favourite who had been tempted to speak pertly in consequence of too much petting, or a youth who had been goaded into rebellion by the intolerable tyranny of a freedman, or a slave whose blood had been turned into flame by some atrocious wrong, learnt forever the hopelessness of his condition, and the abjectness of his servitude, by being sent there for a week or even for a month. Emerging from that den of despair, a human being felt the conviction enter like iron into his soul, that slaves were not men, and had none of the rights of men; and that, unless they wished to throw away their lives altogether, no complaisance to an owner could be too abject, and nothing must be considered criminal which an owner required of his human chattel.

Oaths, and curses, and the lowest abysses of vileness in human conduct, and that blackness of darkness which follows the extinction of the last spark of humanity in the soul of man, and the clanking of fetters all day long, and the shrieks of the tortured, and the yelling of the scourged, and jests more horrible than weeping, and the manifold leprosies of all moral and physical disease — all this Onesimus had to witness, and had to endure, in the slave-jail at Antium. We

have read what prisons were before the days of Howard; what penal settlements and convict ships were forty years ago; but men trained in the most rudimentary principles of Christianity could not, under the worst circumstances, sink quite so low, or be so wholly beyond the sphere of pity, as the offscourings of pagan slavery, the scum of the misery of all nations, huddled into these abodes of death.

It was soon whispered among the wretches there that the handsome Phrygian youth had been high in place among the attendants of Octavia, and had been favoured and promoted by Acte. In their baseness they exulted at his humiliation, and the extent to which his soul revolted from their malice happily helped to preserve him from the contamination which would have been involved in their friendliness. He lived from day to day in the sullen silence of an indomitable purpose. He did not know how long he would be kept there. He waited a month, sustained by fierce resolve, and then determined that, at the cost of life itself — even if it should end in feeding the crows upon a cross — he would attempt his escape. He knew that he had many foes among the struggling envies of Cæsar's palace, and he suspected that Nero's *dispensator* purposely intended to forget him, and to leave him there to rot.

After a few days he was left comparatively unmolested by his companions in misfortune, for there was no amusement to be got out of his savage taciturnity. Once, when one of the ruder denizens had tried to molest him, Onesimus struck him so furious a blow with his fettered hands that he was looked upon as dangerous. As he glanced round at the degraded ugliness of the majority of the prisoners, whose faces only varied in degrees of villainy, he had less than no desire to join their society. He saw but one on whom he could look with any pleasure, or from whom he could hope for any sympathy. This was a young man of honest and pleasant countenance, whose name, he learnt, was Hermas, and who bore himself under his misfortunes with sweetness and dignity. Like Onesimus, he seemed to find his only relief in the strenuous performance of the tasks allotted to him by the *ergastularius*, and as Onesimus watched him he felt convinced that he was there for no crime, and also that he was a Christian.

His conjecture was turned into a certainty by an accident.

One day, as Hermas was digging the stubborn soil, something dropped out of the fold of his dress. He snatched it up hastily and in confusion, and seemed relieved when he noticed that no one but Onesimus had seen him. But the quick eyes of the Phrygian had observed that what he dropped was a tiny fish rudely fashioned in glass, on which had been painted the one word CΩCIC, 'May'st thou save!' They were not uncommon among Christians, and some of them have been found in the catacombs.

The fettered slaves were taken out in gangs every morning under the guardianship of armed drivers, whose whips enforced diligence, and whose swords protected them from assault. The refractory were soon reduced to discipline, but those who worked diligently were not often tormented. In the various works of tillage, Onesimus, hampered though he was by his intolerable manacles, found some outlet for his pent-up anguish and hard remorse. But no one can live without some human intercourse, and one day, when Hermas was working beside him, and none of the rest were near, Onesimus glanced up at him and said the one word *Ἰχθύς*, 'Fish.'

Quick as lightning came the whispered answer *Ἰχθύδιον*, 'a little fish,' by which Hermas meant to imply that he was a weak and humble Christian.

'And you?' he asked. 'Are you one of us?'

Onesimus sadly shook his head. 'Perhaps I was, or might have been, a Christian once.'

'Have you been illuminated and fallen away, unhappy one?'

'Ask me no more,' said Onesimus. 'I am a lost wretch.'

'The Good Shepherd,' said Hermas, 'came to seek and save the lost.'

'It is vain to talk to me,' said Onesimus. 'Tell me of yourself. You are not a criminal, or a madman, or a barbarian, like these.'

'Talk not of them with scorn,' said Hermas. 'Are they worse than the harlots and sinners whose friend Christ was?'

Onesimus would not talk of Christ. 'I never saw you,' he said, 'in Cæsar's household.'

'No,' said Hermas; 'I was the slave of Pedanius Secundus, the city Præfect. He has no rustic prison, and, being a friend

of Nero, he asked his freedman to get leave to send me here.'

'But why?'

'He bade me do what I could not do. Seeing that I was strong and vigorous, he wanted me to marry one of his slave-girls. The worshippers of the gods know nothing of what marriage means. I loved a Christian maiden; I refused the union with a girl of evil character, who, being beautiful, had been the victim of Pedanius already. He scourged me; he tortured me; he threatened to fling me into his fish-ponds; and, when I still held out, he sent me here.'

'Is there no escape from this horrible place?'

'When you go in again, look round you, and see how hopeless is the attempt. The ergastulum is half subterranean. Its windows are narrow, and high above our heads. If we attempted to escape, the least noise would wake the jailers, and some of these around us would be the first to curry favour by helping to defeat our plan.'

'Is bribery useless?'

'Even if I could get the money, I do not think it right to bribe.'

'Why?'

'Because I think that Christ means us to endure all He sends. I trust in Him. If He sends me hunger, I bear it. If He casts me down, I believe that in due time He will lift me up. If He suffers me to be sent to prison, I try to turn the prison into His Temple. But I feel sure that He will deliver me — and that soon.'

Hermas was not wrong. His incarceration was short, because he was one of the few slaves in the family of Pedanius whom the Præfect could trust. Pedanius was a man whose cruel indifference and imperious temper made him more than usually obnoxious to his slaves. He lived in terror of them, and tried to avert danger by inspiring terror into them. He could not do without Hermas. He did not know that he was a Christian; but he knew that in other houses besides his own there had recently sprung up a class of slaves honest and faithful, and that Hermas was one of them. He married his slave-girl to another youth, and Hermas was set free.

And then Onesimus, seeing that every other method of escape was impossible, tried the effects of bribery. He had

managed, though with infinite difficulty, to conceal the gold piece which Octavia had given him, and he had noted that one of the underlings of the prison-keeper seemed to be not unkindly disposed to him. He was a man named Croto, chosen for the office because his stalwart proportions and herculean strength would make him formidable to any unruly slave; but there was a certain rough honesty and kindliness in his face which made Onesimus think that he might move his compassion.

Seizing his opportunity one day, as Croto passed him in the field, he boldly whispered,

'Croto, if I gave you an *aureus*, would you swear to let me have a chance to escape?'

Croto looked long and hard at his beautiful face, and walked on without a word. But as he returned from his rounds he touched him, and said,

'Yes; I pity you. You are not like the rest of this herd of swine. Such things as an escape have happened ere now, and no one is the wiser. Masters don't care to ask many questions.'

'I will trust you,' said Onesimus; and tearing the *aureus* from the hem of his dark serge dress, he slipped it into Croto's hand.

'Keep awake to-night. The two who guard the door shall be drunk. Get up a disturbance after midnight; be near the door, and when it opens — The plan may fail, but it is the only chance I can give you.'

Onesimus pointed in despair to the fetters on his feet.

'When a slave has shown himself quiet and reasonable, they are sometimes removed; and yours shall be. But the manacles on your wrists must remain; they are never removed at night.'

Onesimus made his plans. At the dead of night, when the prison was plunged in darkness — for oil was much too dear to be wasted on chained slaves — he raised a great outcry, as though he had been suddenly attacked. The slaves sprang up from their pallets, heavy and confused with sleep. But Onesimus had all his senses on the alert, and by violently pushing one, jostling against another, and striking a third, he soon had the whole place in a tumultuous uproar of rage and panic, during which he quietly crouched down beside the door. It was opened by the sleepy and drunken guardians, to find the cause of the disturbance, and, before they could be reinforced

by their more sober colleagues, Onesimus dashed the lamp out of the hand of one of them, tripped up the other, and ran to hide himself in the dark corner of an adjacent street, behind the Temple of Fortune. He succeeded, though with great pain, in forcing one hand free from the chain; and hiding the other, with the manacle which dangled from it, under his sleeve, he determined, at the first gleam of light, to try and find some assembly of Christians. He knew that it was their custom to meet at earliest dawn in secret places — generally, if possible, the secluded entrance to some sand-pit — to sing hymns to Christ as God, before the slumbering pagan population began to stir. He was fortunate, for soon, with senses preternaturally quickened by peril, he heard at no great distance the faint sound of a hymn. He made his way towards the spot, and concealed himself till the congregation should break up. He knew that the last to leave was generally the Presbyter; and, waiting for him, he called him as he passed.

The Presbyter started, and said, 'Who goes there?'

Onesimus stepped out of his hiding-place, and said, 'Oh, for the love of Christ, help me to get free from this chain!'

'Thou usest the language of a Christian,' said the Presbyter, 'but thy chain would prove thee a fugitive or a criminal.'

'I have erred,' said Onesimus; 'but I am not a criminal.'

'The Presbyter fixed on him a long and troubled look.

'Thou hast adjured me,' he said, 'in the name of Christ: I dare not refuse. But neither must I, for thy sake, imperil the brethren. Hide thyself again. I will send my son, Stephanus, to file thy chain, and then thou must depart. If thou hast erred, may Christ forgive thee!'

It was not many minutes before the young man came, and, without a word, filed the thinnest part of the manacle till Onesimus was free.

'Peace be with thee, brother!' said Stephanus. 'Men begin to stir. Thou wilt be in danger. We dare not shelter thee. It were best to hide here till nightfall. Food shall be brought thee.'

Onesimus saw that the advice was good. Search might be made for him; but Antium was a large place, and the sand-pit might escape observation. It was so; bread and water were left near his hiding-place, and at night he made his way to Gaieta, which was twenty miles away from Antium.

CHAPTER XXXII

WANDERINGS OF AN OUTCAST

'Matrisque Deum chorus intrat, et ingens
Semivir, obscæno facies reverenda minori,
. . . . .
Jam pridem cui rauca cohors, cui tympana cedunt
Plebeia, et Phrygia vestitur bucca tiara.'
Juv. *Sat.* vi. 511.

Onesimus was still in evil case. Everywhere he was looked upon with suspicious eyes. The mass of the population felt an aversion for fugitive slaves, and such, at the first glance, they conjectured him to be. His dress was a slave's dress — he had no means of changing it — and his hand still bore the bruises of the manacle. There was nothing for him to do but to beg his way, and he rarely got anything but scraps of food which barely sufficed to keep body and soul together. In those days there had long been visible that sure sign of national decadence,

'Wealth, a monster gorged
'Mid starving populations.'

'Huge estates,' says Pliny, 'ruined Italy.' Along the roads villas were visible here and there, among umbrageous groves of elm and chestnut, and their owners, to whom belonged the land for miles around, often did not visit these villas once in a year. Onesimus would gladly have laboured, but labour was a drug in the market. The old honest race of Roman farmers, who ate their beans and bacon in peace and plenty by fount and stream, and who each enlisted the services of a few free labourers and their sons, had almost entirely disappeared. The fields were tilled by gangs of slaves, whose only home was often an ergastulum, and who worked in chains. Luxury surrounded itself with hordes of superfluous and vicious ministers; but these were mainly purchased from foreign slave-markets, and a slave who had already been in

service was regarded as a *veterator*, up to every trick and villany — for otherwise no master would have parted with him. A good, honest, sober, well-behaved slave, on whose fidelity and love a master could trust, was regarded as a treasure; and happy were the nobles or wealthy knights and burghers who possessed a few such slaves to rid them from the terror of being surrounded by thieves and secret foes. But how was Onesimus, now for a second time a fugitive, to find his way again into any honourable household? As he thought of the fair lot which might have befallen him, he sat down by the dusty road and wept. He was hungry, and in rags. Life lay wasted and disgraced behind him, while the prospect of the future was full of despair and shame. He was a prodigal among the swine in a far country, and no man gave him even the husks to eat.

Misery after misery assailed him. One night as he slept under a plane tree in the open air the wolves came down from the neighbouring hills, and he only saved his life from their hungry rage by the agility with which he climbed the tree. One day as he came near a villa to beg for bread he was taken for a spy of bandits. The slaves set a fierce Molossian dog upon him, and he would have been torn to pieces if he had not dropped on all fours, and confronted the dog with such a shout that the Molossus started back, and Onesimus had time to dash a huge stone against his snarling teeth, which drove him howling away.

For one who thus wandered through the country there were abundant proofs of the wretchedness and wickedness of the lower classes of Pagan life. He observed one day the blackened ruins of a large farm-house with its ricks and cattle-sheds, and not far from it he saw the white skeleton of a man chained to the hollow trunk of an aged fig-tree. The spot seemed to be shunned by all human beings, as though the curse of God were upon it. Onesimus was wandering curiously about it, and trying to appease his hunger with a few ears of corn from one of the half-burnt ricks, when the shout of a shepherd on a distant hill attracted his attention. He went to the man, who shared with him some of his black barley-bread, and told him that he had shouted to warn him from an 'ill-omened and fatal place.' 'Why ill-omened and fatal?' asked Onesimus. 'The place belonged,' answered the

peasant, 'to a master who had entrusted the care of it to a head slave. This man, though married, deserted his wife for a free woman of foreign extraction, whom his master had brought to the villa. The fury of his slave-wife turned into raging madness. She burnt all her husband's accounts and possessions. She thrust a torch into every rick and barn, and when she saw the flames mount high, tied herself to her little son, and precipitated herself with him into a deep well. The master, furious at his losses, and shocked by such a tragedy, inflicted a terrible vengeance on the guilty slave. Stripping him naked, he chained him to the fig-tree, of which the hollow trunk had been the immemorial nest of swarms of bees. He smeared the wretch's body with honey, and left him to perish.' The bleaching skeleton had become the terror of the neighbourhood. No one dared to touch it, and the place, haunted with dark spirits of crime and retribution, was shunned far and wide as an accursed spot.

Sickened with miseries, Onesimus gradually made his way to Pompeii. Every street and wall of the bright little Greek town bore witness to the depths of degradation into which the inhabitants had fallen, and the youth found that the radiant scene, under the shadow of Vesuvius and its glorious vineyards by that blue and sparkling sea, was a garden of God indeed, but, like that of the Cities of the Plain, awaiting the fire and brimstone which were to fall on it from heaven. He was specially disgusted because, alien as he was now from all Christian truth, he saw on the walls of a large assembly-room in the Street of the Baths a mass of scribblings full of deadly insults towards the Christians. One in particular offended him, for, by way of coarse satire on some Christian teacher, it said : —

> 'Mulus hic muscellas docuit.'
> 'Here a mule taught small flies.'

It was evidently no place for any one who still loved Christianity. Hurrying from its fascination of corruption, to which he felt it only too possible that he might succumb, he was for some time reduced to the very brink of starvation, and was at last driven to live on such fruits and berries as he could pluck from the trees and hedges. Once, while he was trying to reach some wild crab-apples in a

place by the side of a little stream, which was overgrown with dense foliage, he slipped, and fell crashing through the brushwood into the deep and muddy water which was hidden by the undergrowth. Too weak to rise and struggle, he could only just support himself by clinging to a bough, when his cries were heard. A labourer came and rescued him, and left him sitting in the sunlight to dry his soaking rags. And now he thought that there was nothing left him but to die, and seriously meditated whether it would not be best to fling himself into the green-covered sludge of black water from which he had been rescued, and so to end his miseries.

A sound arrested him, and, lifting his head, he saw a group of the eunuch priests of the Syrian goddess approaching along the road, one of whom shook the jingling sistrum which had attracted his attention. They were a company of seven, and were men taken from the dregs of the populace. With them was a stout youth, who rode an ass which carried their various properties, the chief of which were musical instruments, and the image of the goddess wrapped in an embroidered veil.

As they passed they eyed him curiously, and stopped a few paces beyond him as though for a consultation.

'A likely youth,' he heard one of them say, 'though now he looks thin and miserable. We have long wanted another servant. Would not he do for us, Philebus?'

'Probably a runaway slave,' said another.

'What does that matter to us?' said Philebus. 'We can say that he called himself free-born, and told us that he ran away from the cruelties of a step-mother — or anything else we choose to invent. I will go and question him.'

Philebus was an old man with a wizened and wrinkled face. The top of his head was bald; the rest of his grey locks were trained to hang round his head in long curls.

'Are you hungry?' he asked.

Onesimus nodded.

'Here is bread for you, and some flesh of kid, and some wine.'

Onesimus ate and drank with ravenous eagerness, and the old man asked him, 'A fugitive slave?'

'I was free born.'

'Hum-m!' muttered Philebus, incredulously. 'Well, you are wet, hungry, ragged, miserable. Will you be our servant?'

'I am not going to be a priest of the Syrian goddess,' said Onesimus, with horror.

'No one asked you to be,' answered Philebus, with a sneer. 'You will have light work, good pay, good food.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Only to help in tending the ass, and cooking our meals, and going round with the bag for us when we perform.'

The youth paused. Could he, once a Christian, accept this degrading servitude to the vilest of mankind? Yet, after all, what was servitude? What was degradation? Could he be more miserable than he was? To be a servant of the Galli was better than the suicide and the dimly imagined horrors of that unknown world which he had just been about to brave.

'I will come,' he said.

The old man brought him a tunic in place of his soaked and torn dress, gave him more wine and food, and taking him to the rest congratulated them on their new and handsome servant.

Then began a mode of life which Onesimus could never recall in after years without a blush of shame and indignation — a life of squalor, mendicity, and imposture, made more vile by the sanction of abject superstition. In the morning, when the priests drew near to any place where a few spectators could be gathered together, they set out in motley array, dressed in many-coloured robes, and with yellow caps of linen or woollen on their heads. They smeared their faces with a dye, and painted their eyes with henna. Some of them put on white tunics, embroidered with stripes of purple, and fastened with a girdle, and on their feet they wore shoes dyed of a saffron colour. They placed on the back of the ass the image of their goddess in its silken covering, and then, with wild cries, began a dervish-like dance to the tones of the flute played by their youthful attendant. During this dance they bared their arms to the shoulder, and flourished aloft swords and axes. In this way they wandered through various hamlets till they reached the villa of a wealthy landowner. Here they determined to exhibit the full extent of their mercenary fanaticism. Looking on the ground, turning from side

to side with various contortions, whirling themselves round and round till their long curls streamed from their heads, they bit their arms, and at length cut some of their veins with the weapons which they carried. Then Philebus simulated a sort of epileptic fit. Falling to the ground, with long sobs, which seemed to shake his whole body, he rolled about, accusing himself of the deadliest crimes, like one possessed. After this he seized a scourge, of which the long leathern thongs were studded with bones, and scourged himself with all the endurance of a fakir, till the soil was wet with the blood which streamed from his own wounds and the gashes of his comrades. The crowd looked on with a sort of stupor at the hideous spectacle, and when it ended it was the part of Onesimus, on the attraction of whose personal appearance the wretches relied, to go round with a bag for the offerings of copper and silver coins which were abundantly bestowed on them by the distorted religionism of the spectators. The Galli were further rewarded with gifts in kind. One peasant brought them milk, another bread, and corn, and cheeses, and barley; and a farmer gave them a cask of wine. All these were placed in sacks, side by side with the image of the goddess, upon the ass, which, as the flute-player wittily remarked to Onesimus, 'was now both a barn and a temple.' In this way they made spoil of all the country side.

Occasionally they were even more successful. If they found a farmer specially credulous, they would tell him that their goddess was thirsty, and needed the blood of a ram, promising him a prophecy of the future if he would provide one for sacrifice. The sacrificial victim afforded them an excellent banquet, to which they would invite the lowest scoundrels, and fearlessly reveal themselves in their true colours. Once one of the country landowners, named Britinnus, awe-struck by their supposed sanctity, invited the whole company to the hospitality of his farm. Their stay might have been prolonged but for two accidents. The cook had been ordered to prepare a side of venison for a feast, but this was stolen; and, while he was in despair at the punishment which would be inflicted on him for the loss, his wife suggested that they should secretly kill the ass of the priests, and cook part of it instead of the lost venison. But when the cook came to the stable, the ass took fright, and rushed

straight through the house into the dining-room of the farmer, upsetting the table with a huge crash. The next day a boy burst in, with his face as white as a sheet, and told the terrified Britinnus that a dog had gone mad, had sprung among the hounds, and had bitten not only some of them and some of the farm-cattle, but also Myrtilus, the muleteer, and Hephæstion, the cook, and Hypatius, the footman. On this Britinnus assumed that the Galli had brought him ill luck, and sent the whole troupe about their business.

In the neighbourhood of one town they took to fortune-telling. Binding each person who consulted them to absolute secrecy, they showed their lack of invention by returning the same oracle to all. It was simplicity itself, consisting of the two lines —

> 'The oxen plough the furrowed soil,
> And harvests rich repay their toil.'

Whether they were asked about plans for a matrimonial alliance, or the heirdom to an estate, or anything else, this oracle admitted of any interpretation they chose to put upon it.

Altogether sickened with his companions and with their way of living, Onesimus was further troubled by the insight into every hidden wound and portent of pagan wickedness which came to his ears, or which he witnessed in these country wanderings. Long afterwards, when he was an old man in Ephesus, he used to tell these stories to his friends, to urge them to yet more zealous effort for the healing of that heathen wickedness of which the whole head was sick and the whole heart faint.

On one occasion, for instance, in his wanderings, the Galli had been unable to collect an audience, because the entire population of the little town of Varia was absorbed in the interest of a trial which affected the family of one of their prominent residents. A wealthy burgher had been left a widower with an only son, a boy of modest character, and devoted to his studies. Some years afterwards he married again, and another son was born to him. By the time this second boy was twelve years old his half-brother had grown into manhood, and his step-mother, who hated him for his virtues, determined to poison him. Summoning a slave

who was in her confidence, she sent him to a physician to purchase poison, which she mixed in a cup of wine and placed ready for the youth at the next meal. It happened, however, that her own boy, returning hot and thirsty from school, saw the wine on the table and drank it. He had scarcely finished the draught, when he fell to the ground as dead. The slave who attended him filled the air with his clamour, and when the inmates of the house came flocking in, one accused another of the crime. The master of the house was out, and his wife sent to inform him that her boy had been poisoned, that her step-son was the murderer. The husband was crushed to the earth by the double calamity. His boy was dead; the elder son, of whom he had been so proud, was to be tried for murder. Scarcely were the boy's obsequies finished when the hapless father, his grey hairs defiled with dust, hastened to the Forum, and there embraced the knees of the magistrates, and besought them to avenge him on the fratricide. The local Senate was assembled, and the herald summoned the accuser. Onesimus, who had nothing to do that day, was present at the trial. He heard the old man plead pathetically against the son who had been the pride of his life and home; he heard the youth, with all the calm of innocence, deny the charge. There was no evidence against him but the word of his step-mother and her confidential slave. This man stood up with a front of brass, and declared that the youth had been actuated by jealousy of his brother, and had poisoned him. There was nothing to rebut this evidence, and every juryman was prepared to drop into the brazen urn the fatal ticket marked with the letter C, for *condemno*, which would have handed over the offender to be first scourged until his bones were laid bare, and then to be sewed up in a sack with a cock, a dog, and a viper, and to be flung into the sea. The heart of Onesimus bled for the youth. With his instinctive power of reading character, he felt convinced of his innocence. But while with palpitating heart he awaited the voting, an aged physician arose, and, covering the orifice of the voting-urn with his hand, he said: 'Fathers, let me prevent the triumph of an infamous woman and a perjured slave. That wretch came to me as a physician, and offered me a hundred gold pieces for a poison. I read crime in the

man's face, and put the gold in a purse, which I made him stamp with his seal. Here is the bag. Seize his hand, take off his iron ring, and see whether this be not his seal. If it is, clearly he, and not the poor youth yonder, was the purchaser of the poison.' Onesimus turned his eyes on the slave. His face had assumed a deadly pallor, and all his limbs had burst into a cold sweat; but even when his seal was recognised, he continued to stammer protestations of his innocence. He was tortured, but would not confess. Then the physician rose with a mysterious smile. 'Enough of tortures,' he said. 'The time has come to unravel this web of villany. I sold to yonder wretch, not poison, but mandragora. If, indeed, the boy drank that draught, he does but sleep. About this time he will be awakening, and may be brought back to the light of day.' The magistrates at once sent messengers to the sepulchre where the boy's body had been laid. The father with his own hands removed the cover of the tomb, and there lay the little lad, unchanged, and just beginning to awake, with intense astonishment depicted on his features. Striving in vain to express his joy in words, the happy father — father once more of two dear sons, both of whom he thought that he had lost — folded the child to his heart in a close embrace, and carried him as he was, with all his grave-clothes about him, to the judgment seat. Terror-stricken by such a portent, the woman confessed her crime, and was sentenced to perpetual banishment; the slave was crucified.[1]

Next morning Onesimus, as he accompanied the priests and their ass, saw the criminal hanging naked on his cross. He was a man of fine proportions and in the prime of life, and his strength was slowly ebbing away in horrible and feverish torture. The Galli as they passed spat on him, but Onesimus stayed behind. The wretch was not only living, though in extreme agony, but would probably continue to live for two days more, unless the wolves got at him or the magistrates thought fit to send their lictors to end his life by two blows of a ponderous mallet in order to save the trouble of having the cross watched. It was no base curiosity which made the Phrygian linger by that spectacle of shame and anguish. It was rather an awful pity — a heart-rending remembrance. Sunk, fallen, ruined, guilty as he himself

[1] Note 33.

was, he yet could not see without horror this awful reminder of One who had perished, since his own birth, in Palestine, and in whom he had not yet ceased to believe as a Saviour, though he had fallen away from his heavenly calling.

The man turned towards him his tortured face and glazing eyes. 'By all the infernal gods,' he said, 'give me something to quench my thirst.'

'There are no infernal gods,' Onesimus said, 'but I will give thee;' and taking out from the bag which he carried a bottle of the common *posca* — sour wine which was the ordinary drink of the peasantry — he poured a full draught into an earthenware cup and held it to the sufferer's lips. This he could easily do, for the cross (as always) was raised but a little from the ground.

'God help thee!' he said, as he turned away. 'He helped the robber on Golgotha,' he murmured to himself; 'who knows whether he may not find even this poor wretch in his hour of agony — yea, and even me?'

'My blessing would be a curse,' moaned the crucified slave, 'or I would say, "The gods bless *thee* who canst pity such as I am."'

Onesimus left him there in the pathos and tragedy of his awful helplessness. The youth's soul was appalled by the sense of the mystery of human life and human agony, and it came home to him, as it had never done before, that the solution of the fearful riddle of human wickedness could only lie, if anywhere, in the life and death of Him in whom in some sense he believed, but whose peace he did not know.

Before he joined his base troupe of companions he looked back for a moment. There, in the blinding sunlight of the Italian noon, stood the cross, accursed of God and man, the gibbet of the malefactor, the infamy of the slave, confronting the eye of heaven with a sight which, no less than that of the Thyestean banquet, might have made the sun itself turn dark; and there, upon it, a mass of living agony, conscious, and burning with thirst, and blinded with glare, and unpitied, and burdened with an awful load of guilt, hung the human victim who had once played an innocent child beside his mother's knee. The soul of Onesimus was harrowed as he gazed on that awful insult to humanity. The existence of crucifixion showed how far the shadow had advanced on the dial-plate

of Rome's history. That form of punishment — so cynical, so ruthless, so abhorrent, which less than three centuries later was to be abolished by the indignation of mankind — had been not indigenous in the Western world. It had only been borrowed by Rome, in the days of her commencing corruption, from the dark and cruel East. That such a spectacle should be permitted to the gaze of women and little children; that it should indurate still further the callosity of hardened hearts, was in itself a token of degeneracy. The heart of Onesimus was full even to bursting as he saw that fearful instrument of inhuman vengeance standing there by the roadside among the darting lizards and chirping cicalas and murmuring bees; and the goats stared at it with glassy eyes as they cropped the luxuriant grass at the very feet of the victim in whom the majestic ideal of manhood was thus horribly laughed to scorn.

Onesimus, as he finally turned away, felt it more degrading than ever to continue his present life. Its plenty and coarse comfort, accompanied as it was by the necessity of spending his days with these sexless and lying vagabonds, filled him with a sense of nameless humiliation. Yet what could he do? What other choice had he save to starve or to commit suicide? For then he remembered with a start that he was twice a thief, twice a fugitive, almost a murderer; that he had betrayed the trust reposed in him by Acte; that by his mad drunkenness he had insulted the majesty of Nero. In every sense even his fellow-slaves would have called him *furcifer*. And if he were once detected, in spite of the dye with which he had stained his face, and the blond wig by which the Galli had tried at once to conceal his identity and to enhance his beauty, what awaited him? Was he, too, destined to feed the wild birds upon the cross?

It seemed as if that would be better than to beg from the gulled throngs of peasants, and dupe the credulity of farmers, and witness day by day the stupid and loathly self-gashing and self-scourging of these deplorable eunuch priests. More than once he thought that he would get up by night, seize the image of the Syrian goddess, and fling her into the greenest and slimiest pool he could find, among the efts and water-beetles and frogs; while he himself would plunge into the pathless wastes until he should gain the sea-shore, work his passage

on board a ship to Troas or Ephesus, and so making his way back to quiet Colossæ, would fling himself at the feet of Philemon and implore the forgiveness which he felt sure would not be long withheld.

But that 'unseen Providence which men nickname chance' came to rescue him from his unhealthy bondage. As they were starting for one of their exhibitions in their usual motley and many-coloured gear, the Galli suddenly heard the sound of horses' hoofs, and, before they knew where to turn, a body of mounted soldiers came thundering down upon them, drew their swords, surrounded and seized the whole company, and, beating the wretched priests with their fists and the flat of their swords, called them thieves and all other opprobrious names, and charged them with having stolen a golden beaker from a neighbouring temple of the Mother of the Gods. In vain the Galli protested and swore their innocence and threatened the soldiers with the vengeance of the Syrian goddess for this insult to her ministers. The soldiers silenced their curses with blows, and, tearing away the covering of the image, found the golden beaker wrapped up within it.

Detected in their theft, the priests were still unabashed. After an evening sacrifice they had watched their opportunity, concealed the sacred cup of Cybele, and at the grey dawn had made their way out of the pomœrium of the city, trusting to get sufficiently far to elude pursuit. The beaker was, however, ancient and valuable, and the police asked the mounted soldiers to help them in tracking the fugitives.

'It was not a theft,' said Philebus, who was *archigallus*. 'The Mother of the Gods freely lent the beaker to her sister the Syrian goddess, who intended shortly to return it to her. You cannot escape her wrath for this outrage.'

The soldiers and their *decurio* broke into loud laughter at the threat, and without ceremony put gyves on the wrists of the seven Galli. They consulted whether they should also arrest Onesimus and the flute-player, but Onesimus said that he was ignorant of the theft, that neither he nor his companion — who were acting as slaves of the priests — had ever been permitted to see the contents of the silken veil. The soldiers believed him, and all the more because they did not care to burden themselves with too many prisoners. They

took the Galli to Naples, where Onesimus was afterwards told that they had been scourged, imprisoned, and mulcted of all they possessed.

Free once more, and not troubling himself about their fate, Onesimus asked the flute-player what he meant to do. Finding that he regarded his present calling as too comfortable a berth to be given up, Onesimus left him and made his way disconsolately to Baiæ.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TITUS AND THE VESTAL

'Laudabile est infelicis scire misereri.' — VAL. MAX. v. i. 8

CAST once more on his own resources, Onesimus tried his chance of earning a living in the streets. He had a little money in hand, and, seeing that the street vendors drove a brisker trade in drink than in anything else, he bought two or three dozen bottles of *posca*, and sold them at a small profit to the poorer wayfarers. In this, as in all his adventures, his good looks were of use to him, for men and women alike were more inclined to buy of a lively and pleasant youth than of the wandering Jews and beggars who sometimes attempted the same trade. He began to think that, for the present, he could keep soul and body together in this way; but he had been rash in choosing a place so near Rome, and still more rash in discarding his disguise.

For one day, as he was calling out the merits of his wine in his clear, ringing voice, and making the people laugh with his jokes, Dama, the steward of the lovely villa which Nero owned at Baiæ, caught sight of him. The man had often been to the Palace on business connected with his accounts, and had noticed Onesimus, then dressed in gay attire and at the zenith of his prosperity, as a youth high in favour in the imperial household. He had heard from Callicles, Nero's dispensator, of the drunken escapade which had put so sudden an end to his good fortune, and of his subsequent flight from the ergastulum. Now the flight of any slave, but above all of one of Cæsar's slaves, was so capital an offence that Callicles had asked his friend to keep a good lookout for the recovery of the fugitive. A glance made him nearly sure of the identity of Onesimus, but to be quite certain he took out a copy of the reward which had been offered. It ran as follows: —

'Wanted, a fugitive slave,
Aged about 17.
Handsome, with dark curly hair,
Named Onesimus.
Any one who will give him up, or indicate
where he may be arrested, shall receive a reward of
a thousand sesterces.'

To be quite sure of his prey, Dama stole away so as to approach Onesimus from behind, and coming up to him tapped him smartly on the shoulder and said 'Onesimus.'

'Yes?' said Onesimus with a violent start, taken completely off his guard.

'I thought so,' said Dama, with an unpleasant smile. 'Come with me, my gay fugitive. Cæsar can't possibly spare such a lively and good-looking slave as you; and I shall be very glad of a thousand sesterces.'

Onesimus tried to dart away in flight, but the remorseless hand of Dama clutched his shoulder with too tight a grasp, and with a gesture of despair he remained silent.

'Rescue! rescue!' cried some of the crowd who pitied him, and with whom he was a favourite; and as no soldiers or police were in sight one or two stepped forward to give the youth a chance.

'Rescue?' said Dama, looking around him with cool contempt. 'Don't you know who I am? Do you dare to interfere with the arrest of a runaway from Cæsar's Palace?'

The crowd fell back awe-struck before the awful name of Cæsar, and Dama despatched a slave to bring fetters from Nero's villa hard by. Onesimus was once more a chained criminal with a destiny before him even more horrible than any of which he had yet been in danger. He thought of the poor wretch to whom he had given drink as he hung on his cross. Would that be his own fate of agony now in the flush and heyday of his youth?

Next morning he was sent off towards Rome. He thought of trying to communicate with Acte, who had been deeply grieved by losing sight of him. But this was impossible. There was no one to take any message for him. He was told that not only Callicles — on whom fell in part the disgrace of his escape — but Nero himself was bitterly incensed against him, first, for his unpardonable indiscretion, then for his flight,

and lastly — though this was a secret motive — because it had come to his ears that Onesimus had been the slave who had defeated the midnight attempt on the life of Britannicus. Onesimus, when he had drunk too much Sabine wine, had sometimes forgotten all reticence, and Nero believed that it was through him that certain dark secrets of the Palace had come to be whispered among the lower orders of the Roman population. Acte herself would have been powerless to defend him. One day Octavia, finding that her purple robes had been looked after less skilfully than they had been when under his care, had asked some question about him in the presence of Nero. The Emperor was angry at the mention of his name. Some slaves had been in the room on the occasion, and the circumstance had become notorious in the gossip of the Palace. The unhappy young Phrygian was told that he would probably be crucified; but if not, he would be tied to the furca and scourged, perhaps to death, with the horrible thongs.

On his arrival at Rome the order was given. He was to be beaten — practically to death. In indescribable anguish of soul he spent what he believed to be his last night on earth.

Next morning the furca — two pieces of wood nailed together in the shape of the letter A — was placed on his neck, his hands were fast bound to the ends of the wood, and he was led out towards the Esquiline, where afterwards his corpse would be flung into the common pit.

He was too much stunned and stupefied even to pray. The iron had entered deep into his soul. He looked on himself as a lost apostate who would end a life of miserable failure by entering into the outer gloom beyond, where he feared that the face of the Saviour of whom he once had heard would be utterly turned away from him.

But his hour had not yet come.

Stooping under the furca, with his arms already cramped by their unnatural position, he was led by the slaves and lictors who were to preside at his execution into the Vicus Tuscus on the way to the Esquiline. But as they entered the long street a boy who was strolling towards the Gelotian house caught sight of them, and no sooner had his quick eye seen them than he took in the whole situation at a glance.

It was Titus, much sobered from the gay lad he once had been, and still pale from the illness caused by the sip he had taken of the poison which had carried off Britannicus. He recognised Onesimus, and a Palace rumour had that morning made him aware of the Phrygian's peril. He looked on the slave-youth as a *protégé* of his own, for his admission into the family of Pudens had been mainly due to his intercession. He also felt grateful to him for his ready services towards the murdered friend of his youth, and his kindly heart was filled with pity.

A way of saving him had flashed across his mind, and, bidding his slaves follow him, he darted off at a pace too swift for Roman dignity. In an adjoining street he met — as he was well aware that he should meet — a beautiful and stately lady whom he knew, and who was very fond of him. It was Lælia, the senior vestal, the Virgo Maxima.

Greeting her with extreme reverence, he yet ventured to make her an unsuspecting agent in his little plot.

'Noble Lælia,' he said, with the charm of manner which few could resist, and with a ready fertility of invention, 'I have just seen in the book-shop of Atrectus, in the Argiletum, just opposite the Forum of Julius, a charming little copy of Virgil's Eclogues with such a good portrait! You promised me a present on my last birthday, and said I should choose it myself. May I have that book, and will you come and buy it for me? It is my birthday to-day.'

'Certainly,' said the vestal, with a smile. 'For a boy like you, so good and steady, I would do much more than that.' She little guessed that the birthday was a fib extemporised by Titus for his own purposes, for his birthday was on December 30.

'Thanks, dear vestal,' said Titus. 'Will you not come by this short cut?'

He led her by the hand, her lictor following, into the Vicus Tuscus, which was close by the Argiletum, where he well knew that she would not fail to meet Onesimus and his escort. As they approached he said:

'Oh, Lælia, how I should like to have your privilege of saving the lives of the wretched! See, there is some miserable slave whom they are taking to scourge or crucify. Will you not intercede for him?'

'For a poor *furcifer* like that?' asked Lælia. 'Our high privilege is used for nobles — at the lowest, for freedmen.'

'Are not slaves men like ourselves?' he asked. 'Musonius says so; and Seneca says so. Look, what a fine youth he is! He looks as if he had been free-born; and I dare say he has done nothing really wrong.'

Lælia glanced at the pallid, beautiful face of the sufferer. It would hardly have touched her heart, accustomed as she had been to the massacres of the arena, to which Nero of late years had invited the vestal virgins. But there was something in his youth, and something in the earnest pleading of her favourite Titus — something perhaps also in the sense of power — which decided her to interfere.

'Stop!' she said to the lictors and soldiers, as they bowed reverently before her majestic presence. 'By virtue of my office, I bid you take off that furca, and spare the life of your prisoner.'

'He is a runaway slave, whom for great misdemeanours the Emperor has ordered to be scourged,' said Callicles, stepping forward.

'Dare you disobey the Virgo Maxima?' asked Lælia, with flashing eye. 'Do you think that even the Emperor will insult the majesty of Vesta and her sacred fire, by questioning the immemorial prerogative of her eldest vestal? Take off the furca at once!'

The very lictors were overawed by her gesture of command. They hastily unbound the tired arms of Onesimus, and took the furca off his neck. What would happen to him he knew not, but he knew that for the time his life was saved.

'Thanks, kindest of vestals,' said Titus, gratefully kissing the purple hem of her *suffibulum*, and not betraying by look or sign that Onesimus was known to him. 'I never saw a vestal exercise her prerogative before, and I am so glad to have seen it. May Vesta reward your sleep with her divinest dreams! May Opiconsiva bless you!'

'Opiconsiva?' said the vestal with difficulty suppressing a smile; 'is the boy laughing at me? What do you know of Opiconsiva?'

'Not much,' said Titus, 'except that she has something to do with vestals; and if so, Lælia must be very dear to her!'

Onesimus, with his usual quickness, took his cue from the

conduct of Titus. The right of the vestals was well known in Rome, though it was rarely used, for they were not often seen in the streets. But it was understood that, in order to be valid, the meeting of vestal and criminal must be accidental. Lælia would have been seriously displeased had she known that she was in reality the victim of a little plot on the part of her boy-friend, and Titus was in some trepidation till he had hurried the vestal past the prisoner, and to the choice book-stall which was spread with the purple bindings of Atrectus. There she not only purchased for him the copy of Virgil, but, as he had quoted Seneca, she also gave him a radiant little volume of some of his treatises from the shop of his bookseller, Dorus, hard by. When she gave him this second gift the delighted youth felt a little compunction at his manœuvre.

No one knew what he had done; but, when he narrated the incident to Pudens, the tribune suspected the real state of the case, for the boy's eye twinkled suspiciously as he told his little story with the most innocent candour.

BOOK II

'LACHESIS ROTAT!'

CHAPTER XXXIV

AN EVIL EPOCH

'Inde metus maculat pœnarum præmia vitæ,
Circumretit enim vis atque injuria quemque . . .
Nec facile est placidam ac pacatam degere vitam
Qui violat facteis communia federa vitæ.'

LUCRET. *De Rer. Nat.* v. 1151.

THE career and character of Nero grew darker every year, for every year more fully revealed to him the awful absoluteness of his autocracy. No one dreamed of disputing his will. Every desire, however frivolous, however shameful, however immense, was instantly gratified. His Court was prolific of the vilest characters. There was scarcely a man near his person who did not daily extol his power, his wit, his accomplishments, his beauty, his divinity. 'Do you not yet know that you are Cæsar?' they whispered to him if he hesitated for a moment to commit some deadly crime, or plunge into some unheard-of prodigality.

All things went on much as usual in the corrupt, trembling world of Rome. To-day some wealthy nobleman would commit suicide, amid the laudations of his friends, out of utter weariness of life. To-morrow all Rome would be talking of the trial of some provincial governor who had gorged himself with the rapine of a wealthy province. Or everybody would be whispering a series of witty pasquinades, attributed to Antistius Sosianus or Fabricius Veiento, full of lacerating innuendoes, aimed now at the Emperor and now at some prominent senator. Pætus Thrasea and the peril he incurred by his opposition to the Court furnished a frequent subject of conversation, both to his Stoic admirers and to the rabble of venal senators, who cordially hated him. 'To put Thrasea to death would be to slay virtue itself,' said the graver citizens.

'He is a pompous sham, who wants taking down,' said the gilded youth.

It was a fearful comment on the wretchedness of the times that most of the prominent thinkers and statesmen looked on self-destruction as the sole path to freedom, and the best boon of heaven. They thought it a proof of philosophic heroism when a man died calmly by his own hand, though the act involves no more courage than the vilest of mankind can evince. Seneca tells with rapture the story of the death of Julius Canus. The Emperor Gaius had said to him, after a quarrel, 'That you may not deceive yourself, I have ordered you to be led to execution.' 'I thank you, excellent prince,' said Canus. Ten days passed, and Canus spent them without the smallest sign of trepidation, awaiting the tyrant's mandate. When the centurion arrived at his house with the order that he was to die, he was playing at draughts. He first counted the pieces, and then said with a smile to his friend, 'Mind you don't claim the victory when I am dead. You, centurion, will be the witness that I have one piece more than he has.' Observing the grief of his friends, he said, 'Why are you sad? You are perplexed about the question whether souls are immortal or not. In a moment or two I shall know. If I can come back I will tell you.'[1]

The letters, and all the latest writings, of Seneca vibrate with terror. They are full of the thought of death, and doubtless he lived with the sense of such grim satisfaction as could be derived from the thought that if life became too unbearable he could end it. 'And death,' he said to himself, 'means only "not to be."'[2]

And all this was felt even in Nero's 'golden quinquennium'! Men boasted of the happiness of the days in which their lot was cast, but they knew that under their vineyards burnt the fires of a volcano. Common conversation, home life, dinner parties, literature, philosophy, virtue, wealth, were all dangerous. Neither retirement nor obscurity always availed to save a man. The only remedy was to learn endurance; not to fill too prominent a place; not to display too much ability; never to speak in public without a digression in

[1] *Sen. De Tranq. An.* xiv. 7.

[2] Sen. *Ep.* liv.: 'Mors est non esse.' *Troades*, v. 393: 'Post mortem nihil est, ipsaque Mors nihil.

flattery of the Emperor; to pretend cheerfulness though one felt anguish; and to thank the tyrant for the deadliest injuries, like the rich knight who thanked Gaius when he had killed his son.

Now and then some painful incident, like the bitumen which floats up from the Dead Sea depths, showed the foulness which lay beneath the film of civilisation. Such, for instance, was the fate of Octavius Sagitta, the tribune of the people, and one of Nero's intimates, who was banished for the brutal murder of a married lady who had played fast and loose with his affections. Such, too, was the savage attack made upon Seneca in the Senate by the aged informer Publius Suillius, whose sneers and denunciations caused bitter anguish to the unhappy philosopher. But Nero recked little of such scenes; and as time went on, he fell wholly under the influence which, even more than that of Tigellinus, developed his worst impulses. He became more and more enslaved by the fatal fascinations of the wife of Otho.

Poppæa had every charm and every gift except that of virtue. From the moment that she had riveted the wandering fancy of Nero at the banquet of her husband, she felt sure that her succession to the splendour of an Augusta was only a matter of time. There were obstacles in the way. Otho loved her to distraction. Nero still admired him, and did not think of putting him to death. Nor did he venture to defy public opinion by taking her from her husband, as Augustus had taken Livia from the elder Tiberius. Octavia was Empress, and as the daughter of Claudius, she had a hold on the affections of the people. As the niece of Germanicus, she was dear to the soldiers. Her life was blameless, and Agrippina was anxious to protect her, though she knew that it was impossible to make Nero a faithful husband. Octavia retained the distinction of a consort, if she had none of the love which was a wife's due.

Poppæa determined to surmount these difficulties, and she it was who gradually goaded her imperial lover to the worst crimes which disgrace his name. Through two murders and two divorces she waded her way to a miserable throne.

Her first husband was Rufius Crispinus, by whom she had a son. She had accepted the advances of Otho, who passed for the finest of the young Roman aristocrats; but she aimed

from the first at becoming Empress, and it was with this aim that she had flung her spells over Nero. Her consummate beauty was enhanced by the utmost refinements of a coquette. She pretended to love Nero passionately for his own sake, as though she had become enamoured of his personal beauty; yet while she thus allured his devotion, she carefully checked his advances with a bewitching semblance of modesty. She played the part of the honourable Roman matron. She extolled the open-handed liberality and artistic grace of Otho. She taunted Nero with his love for a freedwoman like Acte. Above all, she missed no opportunity of deepening his irritation against his mother. She saw the instinctive fear of Agrippina which Nero could never quite throw off, and feeling convinced that so long as the Empress-mother lived she could not supplant Octavia, she made it her aim to goad Nero to her murder or banishment. Whenever she saw him most enraptured with her charms — when his hand wandered to the golden tresses, full of burning gleams in the sunlight, which Nero had astonished the poets by describing as 'amber-hued,' and which were the despair and envy of the Roman ladies — she would push his hand aside, and tell him that she was much happier as the wife of Otho than she could be in a palace where her lover was still subject to the maternal sway of one who detested her. Nero became haunted by the fixed impression that he could never be free and never be happy while Agrippina lived. Poppæa did not even hesitate to taunt him. 'You a Cæsar!' she said. 'Why, you are not even a free man! You are still a schoolboy tied to your mother's girdle!'

Nero saw but little of Agrippina. She spent much of her time at one or other of her numerous villas, and rarely occupied the palace of Antonia at Rome. Yet he felt sure that during her sullen isolation she had never abandoned her designs. She might seem to be living in retirement, busy with the improvement of her gardens, or amusing herself with her talking starlings and nightingales; but he knew her too well to imagine that she acquiesced in a defeat which she might yet retrieve. She was but forty-two years old, and in past days she had shown that she knew how to wait. It was known that she was writing her own memoirs, and that their scandalous pages abounded in accusations against others, so dark as

to render men more credulous of the worst accusations which were launched against herself. How could Nero tell what might be passing between her and Octavia when they exchanged visits? His timid and conscience-stricken nature often imagined that she might be intriguing with Faustus Sulla or Rubellius Plautus, both of whom, like himself, were scions of the imperial family of the Cæsars. He saw in her the one fatal obstacle to the fulfilment of his desires.

And she, in those grim years of terror, knew well that Poppæa was no gentle girl like Acte, but would strive to trample on her rivals as Agrippina herself had done in former years. The struggle against Poppæa and her beauty and her ambition would be a struggle of life and death. And, indeed, the bitterness of death was almost past, for her son stooped to the most ignoble methods for rendering her life miserable, and humiliating her even to the dust. At Rome he set on his emissaries to harass her with lawsuits; and, stooping to yet more vulgar baseness, he paid the lowest of the populace to annoy her with coarse jests and infamous reproaches, which they shouted at her from boat or roadside, when she was resting at her country houses.

An attempt was made to poison her at a banquet given by Otho; but Agrippina was wary and abstemious. She had watchful slaves and freedmen near her person, and the attempt failed. Nero persuaded himself that his mother was watching him like a tiger-cat in act to spring. It was not only Poppæa who inflamed his hatred. Tigellinus also had his own designs. He suggested that Otho should first be got out of the way, and then that the death of Agrippina should leave the path open for Nero's union with the siren who had mastered his soul. Octavia, without Agrippina to help her, was hardly considered in the light of an obstacle. She could be swept aside with ease.

The first step was soon taken. Otho was sent as governor to Lusitania. So long as he was there he could not stand in Nero's way. The exile cherished his love for Poppæa to the last; and during his brief spell of empire he induced the Senate to honour her with statues. But he never saw her more.

One day, as Nero sat, with Tigellinus by his side, looking on at a sham sea-fight, for the purpose of which the arena had

been flooded, they were struck with one of the novelties which Arruntius Stella, the president of the games, had devised for the amusement of the populace. During the fight one of the vessels had been so constructed as to go to pieces, to pour a number of armed men out of its hold, and then to be reunited into a trireme as before.

Tigellinus touched the arm of Nero, and Nero, filled with the same thought, turned to him a glance of intelligence.

'The sea is a treacherous element,' said Tigellinus. 'All sorts of strange and unaccountable accidents happen at sea.'

'I wonder who could make me a ship of that kind,' said the Emperor.

'Your old tutor, Anicetus. He is at this moment admiral of the fleet at Misenum. Stella would put at his disposal the artist who contrived this vessel. One like it could be made in a few weeks, and magnificently adorned for the use of the Empress.'

'How could she be induced to go on board?'

'She is at Antium; you are going to Baiæ. The Feast of Minerva is coming on. You must be reconciled to her publicly, must invite her to your villa, and must place the galley at her disposal.'

The sea-fight went on, but it was observed that after the new contrivance of the mechanical ship, Nero did not pay much attention to it. He was apparently lost in thought. He was impatiently revolving in his mind the intolerable conditions by which he was surrounded. On the one side was his mother, haughty, menacing, powerful in spite of her dethronement; and, on the other, Poppæa entangling him in her sorceries, worrying him with importunities, goading him to matricide with envenomed taunts. And behind them both stood the spectre of his tormenting conscience, with thrilling whisper and outstretched hand.

And thus it was that the world went on. In that age morality had well-nigh vanished because faith was well-nigh dead. Man cannot live without a conscience or without God. Guilty pleasure is brief-lived, and afterwards it stingeth like a serpent. It is self-slain by the Nemesis of satiety. The wickedest age the world has ever seen was also the most incurably sad.

But for the poor Christians of Rome, though the days were so evil, life had neither tumult nor terror. They had found that which more than compensated them for the trials of the world. Their life was a spiritual life. To them, to live was Christ. They possessed the strange secret of joy in sorrow, the boast of which upon the lips of the Stoics was an idle vaunt. That secret lay in a spiritual conviction, an indomitable faith, above all, in an In-dwelling Presence which breathed into their souls a peace which the world could neither give nor take away. The life which was to most of their contemporaries a tragedy without dignity, or a comedy without humour, was to them a gift sweet and sacred, a race to be bravely run under that lucent cloud which shone with the faces of angel witnesses, — a mystery indeed, yet a mystery luminous with a ray which streamed to them out of God's Eternity from the Glory of their Risen Lord.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE MATRICIDE

'It was not in the battle,
No tempest gave the shock ;
She sprang no fatal leak,
She ran upon no rock' ——

COWPER.

'Hæc monstra Neroni
Nec jussæ quondam præstiteratis aquæ.'

MART. iv. 63.

BAIÆ in the springtide of A. D. 59 must have been as lovely a place as the world can show. Its blue sky, its soft air, its sparkling sea, its delightful shore, its dry hard yellow sands and rocks gleaming in the clear water, its green and wooded heights, combined with its healing waters and splendid buildings to make it a fairyland of beauty and enjoyment. Marius, Pompey, Cæsar, had built villas there, and the whole line of coast to Puteoli had gradually become crowded with the gay houses of the Roman aristocracy. Temples, and baths, and theatres, and palaces rose on every side, among groves enriched with grottoes and blooming like a garden of enchantment with fruits and flowers. Passing the promontory of Misenum, the traveller first arrived at the more quiet and exclusive Baiæ, and then at the bright town of Bauli itself, until he reached the lakes of Lucrine and Avernus, of which the former had been joined to the sea by a canal, and protected by the magnificent causeway of Agrippina's grandfather Agrippa. Beyond these was Puteoli, with the stately and pillared fane of Serapis, the ruins of which still attest its former magnificence.

The festive splendour of the lovely and dissolute resort was heightened by the universal holiday of the Quinquatrus, or Feast of Minerva. It was kept almost like our Christmas-tide. All the boys had five days' holiday, beginning on March

19, and were at home from their various schools, adding fresh mirth to the joyous watering-place. There were exhibitions of wild beasts, and plays, and poetic and oratorical contests; and on the fifth day of the festival, which was called the Tubilustrium, all the trumpets were blown, and the sacred implements of the temples lustrated.

By this time Nero had accustomed himself to the thought of getting rid of his mother by treacherous violence. His five years of empire had inspired him with audacity and confidence. His passion for Poppæa burned with ever fiercer flame. His hatred for Agrippina, as the main obstacle in the path of his desires, grew daily more sullen; and Poppæa had aroused his fears by persuading him that his mother was plotting against his life. Since poison had failed, and he shrank from using the dagger, he had determined to follow the deadly suggestion of Tigellinus, and to make it appear that the Augusta had perished in an accident at sea.

To prepare the way for his purpose, he began to express his determination to be reconciled with his mother. 'The anger of parents,' he said, 'must be cheerfully borne. It is my duty as a son to soothe my mother's irritation. I long to be on good terms with her once more.' Again and again he repeated these sentiments to various persons, and he took care that they should reach the ears of his mother. Octavia herself, grateful for the efforts of Agrippina on her behalf, told the Augusta that Nero's feelings seemed to be undergoing a change, and that perhaps he would restore to her, spontaneously, her former honours. The hope kindled by this intelligence fell on the last days of the Empress-mother like a ray of cruel sunshine out of the thunder-clouds which had so long been gathering around her. It was natural that in her misery she should be credulous of good tidings, and perhaps her heart was softened to her son by the fact that she was now living in the villa at Antium where she had given him birth, and in which nearly every room recalled the memories of his childish brightness, and the winning trustfulness of a heart as yet unstained, of a beauty as yet unshadowed by evil secrets and base desires. The villa was full of splendour. The Apollo Belvedere and the Fighting Gladiator were but two of the many statues which adorned it. But what was art, what was splendour to a mind diseased? She found more happiness

in the tame birds which would settle on her finger, and the yellow brown-marbled lampreys which came to feed out of her hand.

On March 18, the day before the Feast of Minerva began, her heart throbbed with pleasure to receive a delightful letter from her son. Couched in the most loving terms, it conveyed to her a genial invitation to come to him at Baiæ, and there to spend, in due mirth and feast, the first day of the festival. 'Fancy that I am a schoolboy once more,' wrote Nero, 'and that you, my loving mother, are welcoming me home for my holidays.' How could Agrippina help indulging the hope that better days had at last begun to dawn? The next morning, gladder than she had ever been since her husband's murder, she made her way through the grounds of her villa to the little haven where was moored the Liburnian galley which she used for excursions along the shore.

Agrippina thought that Nature had never looked lovelier as she glided over the flashing waves, and her stalwart rowers in gay liveries,

> 'Bending to their oars with splash and strain,
> Made white with foam the green and purple sea.'

They had hardly rounded Cape Misenum when they met the imperial yacht in which Nero had sailed to meet her. He came on board her galley, warmly embraced her, and accompanied her to the landing-stage of her villa at Bauli, where he bade her farewell, saying that they would meet again in the evening. 'And look, mother,' he said, 'I have provided that you shall be conducted to Baiæ with proper splendour.'

He pointed to a yacht anchored under the trees of her villa, manned with the imperial marines, and superb with fluttering pennons and decorations of gilding and vermilion. It was more splendid than any to which she had been accustomed in the days when, as the sole Augusta and as all-powerful with Claudius, she wielded the resources of the Empire. This yacht, he told her, was to be rowed in front of her Liburnian, and to announce her arrival. There it lay, making a lovely show, and casting its bright broken reflection on the dancing sunlit waters. She was delighted, for she loved magnificence, both for its own sake and for the impression which it makes

on the multitude; and she took this as an omen that Nero would restore to her the body-guard of Germans and the escort of Prætorians the withdrawal of which had cut her most deeply to the heart.

As Agrippina rested after her voyage, she prepared to array herself in her richest and most jewelled robes. She was full of bright anticipations, and thought that now the tortures of the last five years were at an end. The whole world had turned for her to thorns; would some new rose-bud now unfold itself among them? Hardly! It was the custom of ladies on the first day of the Quinquatrus to consult astrologers and fortune-tellers, and the answers of those whom Agrippina consulted that day were far from encouraging. And a disagreeable incident occurred during the morning. While she was being dressed, the message was brought her that, in the concourse of vessels which had attended the Emperor, one of them had accidentally crashed into her own galley, and so broken its sides that it was temporarily unfit for service; happily, however, she could now sail on board the bright vessel which had been sent to wait upon her.

Little did the unhappy woman know that all this had been pre-arranged, and that the chief reason why Nero had sailed to meet her was in order to make the disabling of her galley wear the aspect of a colourable accident!

But she felt an unaccountable unwillingness to go on board the untried vessel. She had heard mysterious hints of danger, too impalpable to be understood, but sufficient to awaken a dim suspicion. Her astrologer, whom she again consulted, vaguely indicated that a storm might arise, and it might be as well for her to go to Baiæ by the road. These faint surmises were emphasised by the arbitrary foreboding of her own heart, which every now and then seemed to pause in its beating, and to chill her happiness with the suspense of the unknown. In vain she tried to dispel these vague spiritual fears. At the last moment she ordered her litter to be prepared, and, making some excuse about the better protection of her robes, had herself conveyed to Baiæ by land.

She was received with open arms from the moment that, with queenly step, she descended from her litter. The guests, and the many slaves, all in their finest array, were grouped

around the entrance, and broke into a respectful murmur of greeting and applause as the gleam of the westering sun flashed on the diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires which encircled her neck and arms and thickly encrusted the broidery of her inner robe. The assembled nobles and courtiers bowed low, the attendants almost prostrated themselves as she advanced towards her son. He seemed to be in his brightest mood of hilarity and affection. He welcomed her with playful sentences and attractive tenderness. He himself conducted her to the banquet, which, to add to its delight, was spread in a room where the couches were so arranged that each guest could have a full view on one side of that 'golden shore of happy Venus,' proud with the gifts of nature and of art; and, on the other side, of the river with its painted shallops and merry holiday-makers. No refinement of luxury or beauty was lacking to the banquet. Nero assured her — but she knew that no one could believe a word he said — he had himself caught the fish by a line from the window beneath which the sea-waves flowed. Then there were plates of melimela, sweet as honeycombs, glowing rosily from their baskets of silver filigree, and olives from Picenum, and cinnamon from the shop of Niceros in Rome, which was so choice that, as he solemnly assured his wealthy purchasers, it could only be procured from the nest of the Phœnix.

Nero insisted that Agrippina should occupy the seat of honour at the table above himself. When she gently remonstrated, he said, 'To whom is the precedence due but to the mother who gave me both my life and my Empire?' Never had he seemed to her to shine with more princely charm than at that entertainment! He exerted himself to display all his geniality and all his accomplishments. He bade her look at the sea, and quoted some lines of young Martial to her:

> 'The wavelets wake from their purple sleep,
> The soft breeze ruffles the dimpling deep,
> Gently the painted shallops glide,
> Borne by the breeze o'er the rippling tide.'

Sometimes he entered with grave dignity upon questions of State, which he respectfully submitted to her maturer judgment; at other times, dropping the tone of confidential inquiry, he plunged into almost boyish gaiety, and interchanged wit-

ticisms with the younger nobles to beguile her into laughter. His conduct was a consummate piece of acting, which would not have disgraced Paris or Aliturus, and Agrippina fell into the snare. At first the shadowy foreboding flitted every now and then across her soul, but now she dismissed it. Surely all those blandishments were sincere! After all, was not she his mother? was not he her son? What was more natural than such a reconciliation between two who were so dear to each other? The hours sped by almost unnoticed, and the exhilaration of the rich wine of which, on an occasion so joyful, she freely partook, added to the hope and bliss which for four weary summers had been strangers to her heart.

But at last it was time to leave, for the banquet and its amusements had prolonged themselves far into the evening. Even Nero, frivolous, corrupt, abandoned as he was, felt the awful solemnity of the moment when he would for the last time behold in life the mother to whom he owed so immense a debt. He strained her again and again to his heart; he gazed long and earnestly into the eyes which were so soon to be closed forever; he covered her hands and her cheeks and even her eyes with his passionate kisses. Almost he wished that the terrible deed had never been contemplated, that the sham reconciliation had indeed be real. 'Farewell, dear mother,' he said, almost with a sob, which came easily to a nature so superficially emotional. 'Take care of your health for my sake.' And then, handing her to the charge of Anicetus, he turned hastily away.

With deep obeisances, but with a smile in his evil eye, the admiral, who had once been a slave, conducted her on board the fatal ship, along the planks which had been covered with purple for her proud footsteps. He led her to the stern, where a canopy of purple silk, fringed with golden broiderings, overshadowed the sumptuous couch on which she was now glad to rest. There were but two attendants with her, her lady-in-waiting, Acerronia Polla, and Crepereius Gallus. Little did those three dream that it was to be their last night on earth!

The night was as enchanting as only a night of the spring on the shores of Italy can be. Overhead, in the deep blue vault, numberless stars seemed to hang like golden cressets, raining their large lustre over that unequalled scene. Beneath

the rhythmic strokes of the rowers the sea flashed into brighter phosphorescence in the shadow of the boat, and the waves rolled away in molten gold. From the near coast, as they steered northwards, the air seemed to come laden with the perfume of flowers from the gardens and blossoming trees. Countless spectators watched the gilded barque, and their torches glimmered along the crowded sands, and the music of their gay songs and serenades came to the happy voyagers. The balm and peacefulness and beauty of the night seemed to set its seal on the reunion of hearts too long divided, and for that hour of blessedness it almost seemed worth while to have lived.

Acerronia, bending over the feet of the Empress as she reclined on the couch, was congratulating her with all her heart on the warmth with which she had been received, and was indulging in a hundred flattering auguries of the future. Surely Agrippina would now be restored to her full honours as Augusta! Once more she would have her home in the Palace of the Cæsars, and ride in a carriage to the capital, and be surrounded by her tall and glittering body-guard! 'He kissed your *eyes*, Augusta,' said Acerronia, 'as though he would embrace your very soul.'[1] To Agrippina also at that moment

'Hope enchanted smiled, and waved her golden hair.'

Crepereius stood near them, only joining in the conversation by an occasional word of congratulation, but enjoying with the two ladies the happy events of the day and the splendour of the balmy night.

Suddenly a whistle was heard from near the prow, where Anicetus was standing. The whistle was followed by a frightful crash. The gay canopy over the Empress had been weighted with lead, and so contrived that by the pulling of a rope it could be freed from its supports. Down it rushed upon the heads of the unsuspecting victims. Crepereius, who was standing up, was instantly crushed to death; but not so the two ladies. They were protected by the side of the boat and of the couch on which the Empress was resting. Half stunned by the terrible accident, they had scarcely realised what had occurred before they saw the galley in a state of

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* xi. 54: 'Oculos cum osculamur, *animum ipsum videmur attingere.*'

indescribable confusion. Only a few of the sailors shared the hideous secret with Anicetus; and as the machinery had failed to act — for the loosing of the canopy ought to have been accompanied by the dissolution of the vessel — they rushed to the larboard in order to upset the boat by their weight. Those who had not been warned of the intended murder rushed to the starboard to prevent an accident. Fierce cries and discordant commands sounded on every side. Half wild with selfish terror, Acerronia struggled from the débris of the canopy and screamed out, 'I am the Empress; help the mother of the Cæsar.' A shower of fierce blows, dealt on her head with oars and boat-hooks, was the answer to her cry and the punishment of her faithlessness. In a moment she too lay outstretched in death. Agrippina was sobered by peril from the fumes of the Falernian of which she had plentifully partaken, and was enabled, by her familiarity with guilty plots, to take in at a glance the significance of the scene. She kept perfect silence. The murder of Acerronia showed her that it was her own life which was being deliberately attempted under pretence of a shipwreck; but she clung fiercely to that life, horrible as it had become, and little as she could now hope ultimately to escape the machinations of her son. Taking advantage of the confusion and the darkness, she dropped herself unobserved into the sea. She was a good swimmer, and boldly struck out for the land; though she then first became conscious that during the scuffle she had received a wound in the shoulder, either from the falling canopy or from the oar of one of the conspirators. Every stroke was painful; she was weighted by her heavy robes, and she doubted whether her strength would hold out; but still she swam for the land with all her remaining force. Surely the silent stars had never looked down on a stranger scene! Here was a matron who but recently had swayed the world, a half-deified Empress, the great-granddaughter of Augustus, the daughter of Germanicus, the wife and priestess of one deified Emperor, and the mother of the reigning Cæsar, swimming for her life in the jewelled robes which she had worn at the imperial banquet — swimming for her life in the dark waves, which became phosphorescent at every stroke, and thus trying to escape to land from the gilded barge which had been murderously wrecked by the contrivance of her son!

It happened that Pudens as one of the officers in charge of the Prætorian escort, was spending his holiday at Baiæ, and had asked Titus to accompany him. King Caractacus and Claudia were also there, and had accepted the invitation of Pudens to join him and their young favourite Titus for a moonlight sail on one of the scores of painted shallops in which the visitors to the watering-place were enjoying the beauty of the night. The youth's eyes had been following the gay vessel which bore Agrippina to Bauli. He saw that there had been some strange disaster; he had heard the crash of the falling canopy, and the discordant tumult of cries and groans which followed. He had seen a splash in the water, and observed the golden divided ripple behind some one who was evidently swimming to escape. He instantly steered the pleasure-boat toward the swimmer, as did some fishermen in another vessel who, then as now, were plying their trade by night. The unhappy Empress first reached the boat of Pudens, and the centurion stretched out his strong arm to rescue her. As she grasped it the light of a torch upheld by Titus shone on his face, and she recognised the young friend of Britannicus. He, too, by the same light caught the flash of her jewels, and saw who she was.

'Immortal gods!' he exclaimed, 'it is the Empress Agrippina!'

Claudia at once pressed to her side. Her face was deadly pale, and the blood of Acerronia had left on it some ghastly spots of crimson. The sleeve of her robe was stained with blood from the wound in her shoulder She was almost too exhausted to speak, but she faintly whispered, 'Hush! Do not mention my name. Let me be unknown.'

They laid her on the cushioned seat, and Claudia, sitting beside her, clasped her hand, wrung the sea-water from the folds of her dripping robe, tenderly parted the wet disordered tresses which clung about her face, and covered her with a mantle, while, at her request, they rowed her towards the Lucrine lake and the landing-place of her villa. Titus bade the fisher-boat accompany them, for their own little pinnace was overloaded. When they touched the land he offered to run up to the villa and order her slaves to bring a litter for their mistress. The Empress, however, entreated them not to wait, but to carry her as best they could, for she was too

weak to walk. A rude litter was hastily constructed from a bench of the fishing-boat, and in this humble and pathetic guise the Augusta was carried by Pudens and Titus into the hall of her house, where a group of wondering and terrified slaves awaited her.

The news had spread like wildfire among the thousands of idlers who were promenading on the shore, and tumult reigned among them. What did it mean? The night was absolutely calm. There were no rocks in the bay. No collision had occurred. That there could have been a real shipwreck was impossible. The gods themselves, by the exceptional calmness of sea and air, seemed to have interfered to expose the hypocritical pretence of any accident. But if there could have been no accident, what was it that had happened? What were they to do? They were in wild excitement. All along the shore of the bay were crowds of men and women, who had streamed out of the villas at the news of some variously reported disaster. No one knew the real facts of the case. The strangest tales were repeated from mouth to mouth, and on all sides were heard agitated questions and startling but discordant answers. The sea-road and the sands and the causeway of the Lucrine lake glimmered with countless torches, which flowed now in one direction, now in another, like streams of fire. The one steady report was that the Empress had been shipwrecked, and was in danger of her life; and the one object was to get a share in the credit of saving her. The piers and boats were crowded with an impatient throng. Some stood at the very edge of the summer waves; others waded neck deep into the warm and glowing water, and stood with outstretched hands staring over the sea to catch sight of any floating form. Amid the confusion, the little pleasure-boat of Pudens was seen rippling its golden path toward Baiæ from the landing-stage of Agrippina's villa, and was instantly surrounded by throngs of eager questioners. In answer to the confused inquiries, Pudens and Titus said that undoubtedly the splendid state galley had, in some way or other, been shipwrecked, but that the Empress-mother had escaped by swimming, and was now safe at her own villa.

As the news spread among the multitudes, they streamed off to the villa at Bauli to convey their congratulations and to surround the house and gardens with applauding cries.

Most of them felt an agreeable sensation in the fact that a first-rate incident had occurred to break the monotony of idleness and vulgar dissipation.

But Agrippina was lying in her chamber, shivering, agitated, with aching body and despairing soul. The undaunted woman had betrayed to her slaves and household no sign that she was aware of what had been intended. She only told them that her galley had been shipwrecked, and her life marvellously preserved. She expressed her deep regret at the loss of her friends Acerronia and Crepereius, and ordered the will of the former to be produced, and all her effects sealed. Not till then did she withdraw into privacy, to meditate on what she should do. All was too plain now! She understood that sugared letter which had summoned her from Antium! She understood why her son had sailed to Cape Misenum to meet her; why her own galley had been purposely run into; why the gorgeous state-barge had been pressed upon her acceptance! She saw through the exquisite banquet, the hypocritical caresses, the murder so deliberately and diabolically planned. . . . Alas! alas!

Revenge, the appeal to force, was out of the question. She was ill and miserable, and felt drained of all her energies. The crowd buzzed and shouted outside; but she gauged too well their cowardly and vacillating nature to rely on any protection from them. She knew that at the sight of a dozen soldiers they would be scattered like the chaff. And who would strike a blow for her? Not the mob, for she was universally hated; not the nobles or the Senate, for they loved her not, and were in any case too selfish, too servile, and too much steeped in dissolute luxury to lift a hand on her behalf. Would the Prætorians rise at her bidding? It was more than doubtful; and if they would, she was at Bauli and they at Rome.

But one thistledown of hope remained to bear the weight of her ruined fortunes. Was it possible that, at the last moment, her son would relent? Those farewell embraces seemed to express something genuine. Perhaps when he found that he had, in spite of himself, escaped the guilt of actual matricide, he might come to a better mind. The gods had offered him one more opportunity for repentance: would he embrace it? Yes; she came to the decision that

her best course was to feign ignorance of the design of which she had been the victim, and to trust to the reawakenment of filial affection in Nero's mind.

She summoned to her presence her freedman Lucius Agerinus.

'Go to the Emperor,' she said, 'and tell him that, by the merciful protection of the gods, his mother has been saved from a terrible disaster. Anxious as he must naturally be about my safety, ask him not to cherish any solicitude, but to postpone for the present the visit which he will wish to pay me. I am greatly in need of rest.'

Agerinus set out, little foreseeing that he too was potentially a murdered man. Agrippina — ill, disenchanted, utterly weary of the world — once more lay on her couch, with throbbing brows and lacerated soul, a prey to unspeakable anguish. A single slave-maiden was her attendant; a single golden lamp shed its dim light from its marble stand over her room. In her utmost need there was not one to whom she could speak, or in whom she could confide. Oh, how she longed for one hour of Pomponia's company, for one whisper of the consolation which had once fallen for a moment like the dew upon her soul! But Baiæ was the last place where Pomponia would be likely to be found.

The slave-girl, withdrawn into the shadow, and engaged in spinning wool, looked up furtively again and again at the face of the Empress, who was too much absorbed in her own thoughts to notice her. The girl saw passion after passion chase each other like dark clouds across Agrippina's face. At one moment the clenched hand, the quivering nostril, the flashing glance, showed that the thought of possible vengeance was passing through her soul. Then for a moment a softer expression would smooth her features, as she dreamed of the possibility of her son's remorse. Then terror would express itself on her features as she recognised the frightfulness of her position. Last of all, an infinite languor seemed to droop through her whole being, as she resigned herself to sullen despair.

In those dark uncertain hours she realised all the error and infatuation of her life. Impunity, after so many crimes? Impunity, when the menacing spectres of perjury and adultery and murder kept starting upon her out of the darkness? Crispus Passienus poisoned; Lucius Silanus hounded to death

by lying informers; his murdered brother Marcus; her husband Claudius — were they all to be unavenged? Had the gods no thunderbolts? Had the guilty ever escaped them? Had Tiberius died in peace after his atrocities and crimes? Had Gaius died in peace amid the tears of his beloved? Had Messalina escaped the consequences of her debaucheries and murders? Did not the violated laws of heaven put into the hand of their transgressors their whips of flame? And as she began to realise that Retribution dogs guilt like its own inevitable shadow, the line of the old Greek poet rang ominously in her memory: —

> 'Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.
> Though in patience long He waiteth, with exactness grinds He all.'

And, all the while, the nightingales in the gardens of her villa were pealing forth their ecstasy, and the stars shone, and the soft wind breathed of perfume.

CHAPTER XXXVI

SELF-AVENGED

'Sua quemque fraus, suum facinus, suum scelus, sua audacia, de sanitate ac mente deturbat. Hæ sunt impiorum furiæ, hæ flammæ, hæ faces.' — Cic. *In Pisonem*, xx. 46.

Nero, in a mood of fearful restlessness, awaited news of the issue of his design. Long ere this he ought to have received the intelligence which would relieve his life of a great burden. Hardly for a moment did the enormity of the crime he was committing press upon a soul given up to shameful self-indulgence. He only yearned to be rid of a figure which frightened him, and checked the rushing chariot-wheels of his passions. Once free from his mother and her threats, he would marry Poppæa and give himself up to whatever his heart desired. Too uneasy to sleep, too much occupied with anxiety to follow his usual pleasures, he talked to Tigellinus, who alone was with him, pacing up and down the hall of his villa, tossing down goblet after goblet of wine, and trying to conjure before his imagination the scene which was being enacted. Surely it could not fail! And, if it succeeded, the dead tell no tales, and the sea-waves would keep the secret! Every one had seen the warmth of his attention to his mother, and the affectionate tenderness with which he had bidden her farewell. What remained but publicly to deplore with tears the sad bereavement which had been inflicted on his youth by the treachery of winds and waves, and then to decree to his mother's memory the temples and the altars which would be ostentatious proofs of his filial regard?

But how was it that no news had reached him? Three or four hours had passed. By this time the deed must have been done. Something had happened — so much was certain; for though he dared not send out to inquire, as though he suspected that anything was wrong, yet from the balcony he saw the torches moving in hurried streams hither and

thither, and he could hear the distant cries of excitement and alarm.

A messenger was announced.

'Who is it?' asked Nero anxiously.

'The centurion Pudens,' said the slave; 'and he is accompanied by Titus Flavius.'

Nero started at the name, for it recalled the night of the murder of Britannicus.

'What do they want?'

'They have important tidings, which they will tell to Cæsar's ears alone.'

'Admit them. See that the guard is on duty close at hand.'

Pudens and the youth were ushered into Nero's presence, and, in answer to his agitated inquiries, told him all that had occurred, and how they had helped to rescue the Empress as she was saving herself by swimming. They were dismissed, each with a handsome gift; and scarcely had they left the room when Nero, pale as death, and with a heart which throbbed with painful palpitations, flung himself on a couch and turned a terrified look on his accomplice.

'The plan has been bungled,' he said. 'I am ruined. My mother has been wounded. She knows all.'

Tigellinus feared that in his terror he would swoon away, and sprinkled his face with water.

'What will she do?' asked Nero in a faint voice. 'Will she arm her slaves to attack and murder me? Will she rouse the soldiers? Will she go to Rome and accuse me of matricide before the Senate and the people?'

The older and robuster villainy of Tigellinus was not terrified by these alarms; but he too saw that the situation was serious, and did not know what to advise.

Nero, shaking with alarm, sent messengers in fiery haste for Burrus and Seneca, both of whom had come from Rome to Baiæ at his request to attend upon him during the Quinquatrus. They were roused from their beds at the dead of night, and hurried to Nero's villa. He told them that, after his mother had left him, her vessel had been wrecked, and that she had swam to land with no worse hurt than a slight wound; but he added, 'She suspects that I have attempted her life: and how am I to escape her vengeance?'

Burrus and Seneca stood silent and thunderstricken. They were innocent of the vile attempt. Dim rumours of some grave crime which was in contemplation had indeed reached them; and in Nero's court everything seemed credible. The murder had been the design of the execrable Anicetus and the yet more execrable Tigellinus, and had only been revealed to kindred spirits such as Poppæa. But they at once saw through the story which Nero told them, in which he had indeed betrayed himself.

It was a moment of anguish and of degradation for them both. The blunt, honest soldier was thinking of his happier youth, in which virtue was not compelled to breathe so contaminated an atmosphere. He was secretly cursing the day on which ambition had led him to espouse the cause of Nero, and so to be dragged into loathed complicity with so many crimes.

And through the heart of Seneca there shot a pang of yet keener agony. He a philosopher; he a Stoic; he a writer of so many high-soaring moral truths; he so superior to the vile and vulgar standard of his age — to what had he now sunk! Was this corrupt fratricide — this would-be murderer of his mother — the timid boy who, little more than five years before, had been entrusted to his tutelage? And was he now called upon to advise the most feasible way in which a matricide could be accomplished? Was he, of all men, to be the Pylades to *this* viler Orestes? Was it to the edge of such a precipice that he had been led by the devious ways of a selfish ambition?

A nobler path was open to him had he desired it. Why should he not have urged Nero to visit his mother, to expostulate with her if need be, to be reconciled with her in reality? Might he not have told him that, if Agrippina were really conspiring, it would be better for him to run that risk than to stain his hands in a mother's blood? Titus was not a professed philosopher like Seneca, yet Titus rose spontaneously to that height of virtue in later years. He knew that his brother Domitian was working in secret as his deadly enemy, yet he only took him gently aside, and entreated him to behave more worthily of a brother. And when he saw that his entreaty had failed, he did indeed weep as he sat at the games, but he would not shed his brother's blood.

Alas! the conscience of Seneca did not suggest to him this means by which he could extricate himself. That Agrippina was, at such a crisis, preparing to rebel against her son he did not believe; but might she not — so whispered to him once more the demon of concession — might she not become dangerous hereafter? In other words, must he not help the Emperor to accomplish his fell purpose? The silence became intolerable.

At last Seneca turned his troubled eyes on Burrus, as though to inquire whether it would be safe to command the execution of Agrippina by the Prætorians.

Burrus understood his look and bluntly replied that such a thing was not to be thought of. The Prætorians would never lift a hand against the daughter of Germanicus. The same thought had been in his mind as in that of Seneca, though he had blushed to give it utterance. But now that he saw the drift of his colleague's purpose, he gulped down his scruples, and said with sullen brevity, 'Let Anicetus complete what he has begun.'

Anicetus had been on board the deceitful vessel, and, on the failure of the device, had made his way with all speed in a rowing boat to the Emperor's villa. He entered at the moment when Burrus spoke. Nero turned on him a look of rage, and, walking up to him, stammered into his ear the threat that his life should pay the penalty of his clumsy failure.

'Be calm, Cæsar,' he replied in a whisper; 'your wish shall still be accomplished. Only give me your authority to end the business.'

Anicetus hated Agrippina for private reasons, and he knew that, if she were not put to death, she would demand vengeance upon him, since the treachery on board the vessel could not have been effected without his cognizance. 'Leave it in my hands,' he said. 'If Seneca and Burrus are too timid to strike a blow for their Emperor, at least Anicetus will not shrink.'

'Thanks, Anicetus,' said Nero, changing his mood. 'To-day, for the first time, I feel secure. Now I begin to recognise that I am indeed Emperor. And a freedman is the author of the boon!'

He frowned at his two ministers to reprove their backward-

ness in murder, and effusively grasped the hand of the admiral. Burrus, as he looked at his scowling countenance, felt a fresh pang of remorse that he had ever deserted the cause of Britannicus. Seneca said to his agonised conscience, 'If one would be the friend of a tyrant, one must not only wink at crimes, but commit them without a moment's hesitation, however heinous they may be.'

While Anicetus was hastily suggesting the steps to be taken, the announcement came that one of Agrippina's attendants — Lucius Agerinus — was waiting outside with a verbal message from the Augusta. Before he was admitted Nero whispered something to Anicetus. 'Yes, yes,' said the admiral, 'the plan is excellent.'

Both Seneca and Burrus were amazed and shocked at the stupid and shameless comedy which was then enacted before their eyes. Agerinus had hardly begun to deliver his message when Nero, stepping up to him, dropped a sword at his feet. It fell with a clang on the white and purple mosaic, and instantly Nero and Anicetus began to clamour, 'Murder! treason! murder! he has been sent by Agrippina to stab the Emperor!'

At this shout the body-guard came running in, and Agerinus was loaded with chains. Anicetus now had the excuse he needed. He summoned a band of soldiers and marines, and, accompanied by Herculeius, one of his naval captains, and Obaritus, an officer of the marines, he made his way to the villa at Bauli, giving out that he was ordered to execute Agrippina, who had just been detected in an attempt to assassinate her son.

They found the precincts of the villa thronged by a curious crowd. These they drove away, and surrounded the grounds with guards. The slaves dispersed in all directions. Agrippina was still in her dimly lighted room, growing momently more alarmed because Agerinus did not return and she received no message from Nero. Nearer and nearer came the tread of feet till they heard the soldiers enter the atrium. There followed a brief altercation as the murderers scattered the few faithful attendants who would still have guarded the door of the chamber. The slave-girl rose to fly.

'Dost thou also desert me?' said the Empress bitterly.

But the girl's figure had scarcely disappeared when the

door was rudely burst open, and she saw the cruel face of her enemy Anicetus, who held his drawn sword in his hand.

For a moment they stopped before her imperious gesture.

'If you have come from my son to inquire after my health,' she said, 'tell him that I am better. If you have come to commit a crime, I will not believe that you have his authority.'

'We have his authority,' said Anicetus. 'Behold his signet-ring!'

They advanced upon her. She sprang from her couch and stood erect. Then the brutal Herculeius struck her a blow on the head with his baton, and Anicetus aimed his sword at her breast. She avoided the stroke, and, rending her tunic, 'Strike here,' she said, pointing to her womb; 'it bore a monster!'

She fell, stricken down, and thrust through with many deadly wounds.

Thus ended that career of wickedness and splendour. Almost from the day which consummated her many crimes she heard behind her the fatal footstep of the avenger. Her murder of Claudius had placed the diadem upon the brow of her own murderer. For that young murderer she had felt the frantic love of a tigress for the cub which she licks and fondles. And now the tiger-whelp had shown the nature which it inherited.

When Nero received the news that his mother was dead, he would not trust to any testimony. With wild haste and utmost secrecy he went to the villa at Bauli. With trembling hand he drew the winding-sheet from the face, and gazed on the corpse. The colour fled from his cheeks; but after a moment or two he grew bolder. The matricide was still the æsthete. 'I did not know,' he said, 'that I had so beautiful a mother.' Then he hurried back.

That same night they carried her corpse to the funeral pyre. It was laid upon a couch from her banquet-hall, for lack of a regular bier. Hurried and scant and humble were her obsequies. Her ashes were laid in a mean grave near the road to Misenum, where the villa of the dictator Cæsar

crowned an eminence which commanded a wide view of the gulf.

During the remaining ten years of her son's reign, the site of her sepulchre was left unhonoured and no mound was raised above her ashes. But the spot was not forgotten, and to this day the peasant points to the Sepolcro d' Agrippina. One instance of faithfulness gave a yet more pathetic interest to the spot where so many lofty hopes were quenched in blood. Before the pyre was kindled, Mnester, her loyal freedman, stabbed himself over her corpse. He would not survive a mistress who, whatever had been her crimes, had been kind to him, and whom he loved.

What pathos is there in the fact that even the worst and most criminal of human souls have rarely died entirely unloved! Even a Marat, even a Robespierre, even a Borgia, even an Agrippina, found at least one to mourn when they were dead.

CHAPTER XXXVII

VICTOR OVER THE PUBLIC SERVITUDE

'Pallidumque visa
Matris lampade respicis Neronem.'
STAT. *Sylv.* II. vii. 118.

'Prima est hæc ultio, quod se
Judice nemo nocens absolvitur.'
JUV. *Sat.* xiii. 2.

THERE is a marvellous force of illumination in a great crime, but it is the lurid illumination of the lightning-flash, revealing to the lost Alpine wanderer the precipices which yawn on every side of him. While the murder was yet to do, Nero could talk of it lightly and eagerly among the accomplices who were in the secret. To the irresponsible Emperor of the world it did not seem so great a matter to order the murder of a mother. But when the deed was done, when he had got back to his Baian villa, when the pale face flecked with crimson bloodstains came hauntingly back upon his memory, a horror of great darkness fell upon him. Then first he realised the atrocious magnitude of his crime, and every moment there rang in his ears a damning accusation. The very birds of the air seemed to flit away from him, twittering 'Matricide! matricide!' He drank more Falernian from the glittering table, on which yet lay the remains of the banquet, but it seemed as if all his senses were too preternaturally acute with horror to be dulled by wine. He lay down to sleep, but strange sounds seemed to be creeping through the dead stillness of the night, which made him shudder with alarm. If he closed his eyes, there flashed at once upon them the pale face, the firm-set lips, the splashes of blood. The dead eyes of his mother seemed to open upon him with a gleam of vengeance. Till that night he had never known what it was to dream. He started up with a shriek and summoned his

attendants round him, and paced up and down in a frenzy of delirium, declaring that when the dawn came he would certainly be slain. They persuaded him to lie down again, but scarcely had he dropped into an uneasy sleep when it seemed to him as though he saw the three Furies sweeping down upon him with the blue snakes gleaming in their hair and the torches shaken in their hands, while his mother, who pointed them to him, shrieked aloud, 'Ho! murderer of thy mother! no sleep henceforth for thee!'

Leaping once more from that couch of agony, he sat mute, and trembling in every limb, his clenched hands buried in his hair, waiting in anguish the break of day. When the first beam of dawn lit the east, it showed a youth whose pallid features were haggard with agonies of fear.

If there had been a spark of nobleness in the Roman world, the indignation of a people's moral sense might have sprung to arms and smitten the tyrant while he was yet red-handed from his crime. Nothing was farther from the general intention. The universal desire was to 'skin and film the ulcerous place' with adulation and hypocrisy. Men, not naturally evil or case-hardened, were carried away by the tide of complaisance to the imperial murderer. As though to leave no chance for any feelings of penitence to work, all classes began to flood him with congratulations. The fears which at the moment he half mistook for remorse vanished like the early dew, for society seized upon the convention that Agrippina, detected in a plot against the life of her son, had been justly executed. The tribunes and centurions of the Prætorians, Burrus at their head, came to Nero that morning, poured their felicitations upon him, pressed his hands, expressed their effusive joy that he had escaped from so sudden a peril created by his mother's crime. His friends crowded to the temples to thank the gods for his safety. There was scarcely a town of Campania which did not express its joy by sending deputations and offering victims. Distant provinces caught the infection, and Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul surpassed all the rest by the fulsome entreaty which they sent by their ambassador, Julius Africanus, 'that Nero would endure his felicity with fortitude!' Certainly it did not seem as if there were much cause for fear! In a few days Nero became an adept at the counter-hypocrisy with which he feigned to

weep over the fate of his mother, and to be grieved by his own deliverance!

But places cannot change their aspect as do the looks of men. From the windows and gardens of Nero's villa were always visible the sea which he had attempted to pollute, the long line of shore which he had stained with a mother's blood. The aspect of nature in that lovely spot had lost its fascination. It seemed to be eloquent with mute reproach. And what were those sounds which assailed his ears at the dead of night? What meant that blast of a solitary trumpet, blown by no earthly breath, from the promontory of Misenum? What meant those ghostly wailings which seemed to shriek around his mother's grave? He could not endure this haunted place. He fled to Naples.

From thence he despatched to the Senate a letter, of which the conceits betrayed, alas! the hand of Seneca. 'As yet,' he wrote, 'I cannot believe, I do not rejoice, that I am safe.' Men of letters admired the euphuistic phrases and despised their author. The letter did not mention any details, but left it to be inferred that Agrippina, detected in an attempt to murder her son, had committed suicide. And then with unmanly malignity it dwelt on the long catalogue of her crimes—her bitter enmities, her immense ambition, her unscrupulous intrigues. To her it attributed all the cruelties of the reign of Claudius, and it ended by saying that her death was a public blessing. The more cynical of the senators laughed at the absurdities of this missive, for it narrated Agrippina's shipwreck as though it had been accidental, and tried to gain credence for the gross absurdity that a woman barely saved from drowning had chosen the moment of her rescue to send off to murder her only son in the midst of his fleets and cohorts!

But though men shook their heads at Seneca, they plunged no less emulously into the vortex of criminal adulation. Public thanksgivings were decreed to all the gods; annual games at the Quinquatrus; a golden statue to Minerva in the senate-house, with a statue of the Emperor beside it. The birthday of Agrippina was pronounced accursed. Such abject servility was too much for the haughty spirit of Pætus Thrasea. He rose from his seat and left the senate-house in silence, and a blush rose to the cheek of not a few who did not dare to follow him.

Yet, after all, Nero was so timid that six months elapsed before he ventured once more to face the people of his capital. An eclipse of the sun had happened during the thanksgiving decreed by the Senate. Fourteen regions of the city had been struck by lightning. Would these portents of heaven awaken the tardy indignation of men? Every piece of news, however trivial, frightened him. He was told the ridiculous story that a woman had given birth to a snake. Was that meant by the gods, if there were any, for a scornful symbol of himself? There were hours in which it seemed to him as if the Empire itself would be a poor price for the purchase of one day of the innocence which he had so frightfully sacrificed.

But the foul creatures who swarmed about him assured him with the effrontery of experienced villainy that he need not be in the least anxious as to the obsequiousness of the Senate and the zeal of the people.

'You will find yourself more popular than before,' they said. 'Every one detested Agrippina. Go to Rome with confidence, and you will see that you are as much adored as ever.'

They were right in their conjectures. Even Nero was amazed at the *abandon* of welcome, the delirium of ostentatious applause with which he was received, while his hands were still red-wet with his mother's blood. The people thronged forth by their tribes to greet him. The senators were in festal array. They were surrounded by their wives and children. Stages had been built all along the road, in which the spectators had purchased their places to look on as at a triumph. Incense burned in the streets; the shouts of myriads of voices rent the air. Rome received him not as a murderer, but rather as a great conqueror or a human god. And he, as he rode in his gilded chariot through those serried files of cheering flatterers, proudly upheld his head, tossed back the curls from his forehead, smiled, and bent low, and, accepting these greetings as a tribute to his merits, drowned deep within his heart all sense of shame. With long retinue and dazzling pomp he visited the Capitol, gave thanks to Jupiter, best and greatest, and returned to the Palace 'a victor over the public servitude.'

Yet even so he could not escape. He dared not be left alone. The manes of his mother haunted him by day and by

night. In vain he practised the old expiatory rites to rid himself of the menacing phantom. On the night of May 13, two months after Agrippina's death, he determined to go through the mummery of the Lemuralia, which some of his credulous advisers had told him would be efficacious. At midnight, amid the dead silence, he stole with naked feet to the water of the fountain in the atrium, and there, trembling with excitement, washed his hands thrice. Then with his thumb and finger, he filled his mouth with nine black beans, and, full of superstitious horror, flung them one by one behind him over his shoulder, saying each time, 'With these beans redeem me and mine.' Arrived at his chamber he again dipped his hands in water, and beat a great brazen gong to terrify the pursuing ghost.[1] Then he turned round, and peered with a frightened glance into the darkness; and as he peered — was even this expiation all in vain? — what were those glimmering lights? What was that white and wavy form? A shriek rang through the villa, and Nero sank fainting into the arms of the timid minions who had awaited the result of the expiation and rushed forward at his cry.

The following year, when he had returned to the city, he repeated this antiquated rite, and he commanded the vestals to bear him specially in mind when, on the Ides of May, they flung from the Sublician Bridge into the Tiber the thirty little figures called *argei*, made of bulrushes, which were supposed to be in lieu of human sacrifices.

Then he tried yet further forms of magic and yet darker rites of propitiation to the infernal powers, in which it was whispered that human blood — the blood of murdered infants — formed part of the instruments of sorcery. But he could learn no secrets of the future; he could evoke no powers who could ward away that white menacing spectre which gleamed upon him if at any moment he found himself alone in the hours of night.

Nero became a haunted man. The whole earth seemed to him to be 'made of glass' to reveal his turpitude. He knew in his miserable heart that the very street boys of Rome — the ragged urchins of the slaves and gladiators — were aware of the crime which he had committed. Kind friends kept him informed, under pretence of officious indignation, that

[1] Note 34.

one night an infant had been found exposed in the Forum with a scrap of parchment round its neck, on which was written, '*I expose you, lest you should murder your mother;*' and that, another night, a sack had been hung round the neck of his statue as though to threaten him with the old weird punishment of parricides. Once, when he was looking on at one of the rude plays known as Atellane, the actor Datus had to pronounce the line,

'Good health to you, father; good health to you, mother;'

and, with the swift inimitable gestures of which the quick Italian people never missed the significance, he managed to indicate Claudius dying of poison and Agrippina swimming for her life. The populace roared out its applause at an illusion so managed that it could hardly be resented; and once again, when coming to the line,

'Death drags you by the foot.'

Datus indicated Nero's hatred to the Senate by pointing significantly to Nero at the word '*death*' and to the senatorial seats as he emphasized the word '*you.*'

But Nero was liable to insults still more direct. Could he not read with his own eyes the *graffito* scrawled upon every blank space of wall in Rome: '*Nero, Orestes, Alcmæon, matricidæ*'? He could not detect or punish these anonymous scrawlers, but he would have liked to punish men of rank, whom he well knew to have written stinging satires against him, branding him with every kind of infamy.

Two resources alone were adequate to dissipate the terrors of his conscience — the intoxication of promiscuous applause and the self-abandonment to a sensuality which grew ever more shameless as the restraints of Agrippina's authority and Seneca's influence were removed.

Nero had long delighted to sing to the harp at his own banquets in citharœdic array. To the old Roman dignity such conduct seemed unspeakably degrading in the Emperor of the legions. Yet Nero divulged his shame to the world by having himself represented in statues and on coins in the dress of a harpist, his lips open as though in the act of song, his lyre half supported on a baldric embossed with gems, his tunic falling in variegated folds to his feet, and his arms covered by the

chlamys, while with his delicate left hand he twanged the strings, and with his right struck them with the golden plectrum. The pains which he took to preserve his voice, which after all was dull and harsh, were almost incredible. Following the advice of every quack who chose to pass himself off as an expert, he used to walk about with his thick neck encircled in a puffy handkerchief, to sleep with a plate of lead on his chest, and to live for a month at a time on peas cooked in oil.

To give him more opportunities for display he instituted the Juvenalia to celebrate his arrival at full manhood, as marked by the shaving of his beard. His first beard was deposited in a box of gold, adorned with costly pearls, and he dedicated it to the Capitoline Jupiter. But even this event in his life was accompanied by a crime. Shortly before he laid aside his beard he paid a visit to his aunt Domitia, who was ill.

Laying her hand on the soft down, she said to him in her blandishing way, 'As soon as I have received this, I am ready to die.'

Nero turned round to the loose comrades who usually attended him and whispered, with a coarse jest, 'Then I will shave it off at once.'

From that sick-bed Domitia, who was almost the last of Nero's living relatives, never rose again. The Roman world suspected foul play on the part of the physicians at Nero's order. Certain it is that he seized all her ample possessions, and suppressed her will.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE GLADIATORS' SCHOOL

'Commorabor inter homicidas, inclusus turpiore custodia et sordido cellarum situ.' 'In ludo fui, qua pœna nullam graviorem scelera noverunt, cujus ad comparationem ergastulum leve est.' — QUINCTILIAN.

ALTHOUGH the intervention of the vestal and the kindly ruse of Pudens had saved the life of Onesimus, his condition was far from enviable. He was once more — now for the third time in his life — in overwhelming disgrace. It is true that all the legal customs were observed, in a house controlled by that respect for archæology of which the fashion had been set by Augustus. The chains were taken off his limbs and flung out of the court through the impluvium. None the less he felt that he was marked and shunned. One day, after his escape, Nero passed him in one of the corridors, and, struck by the appearance of a handsome youth, beckoned him to approach. He came forward trembling, and the Emperor, peering into his face, recognised the purple-keeper of Octavia. Inspired by sudden disgust at the memories thus called to his recollection, he summoned his dispensator Callicles into his presence, and ordered him to get rid of 'that worthless Phrygian.'

'Shall I put him in prison, or have him sent again to the ergastulum at Antium?' asked Callicles.

'Neither,' said Nero. 'The City Prætor, Pedanius Secundus, is about to give some votive games of beasts and gladiators. Make a present to him of this youth.'

Onesimus heard the words, and his heart sank within him. But resistance was useless. On his way he passed the door of Acte's apartments, and not without peril ventured to sing a few notes of the old Thyatiran ballad which had first attracted her notice. She heard it, and came out.

'That youth comes from my native land,' she said to the dispensator. 'Step back a few paces and let me have a word with him.'

Callicles would hardly have granted the favour to any one else, but every one loved Acte, and he only said, 'If Nero should come?' . . .

'I will hold you clear,' said Acte.

Onesimus, overcome with shame, knelt on one knee, kissed the fringe of her robe, and whispered, 'Oh, Acte, I am condemned to be a gladiator.'

'In which school?'

'Under Rutulus, the trainer of Pedanius Secundus — the cruellest man in Rome.'

He told her something of his story, and she saw that to help him was beyond her power. All she could do was to slip into his hand her own purse, and to tell him that if ever the day came when she could befriend him she would do her utmost. More she dared not say, for the suspicious eyes of Callicles were upon her, and she had to repress the emotion which agitated her frame.

In the school of Rutulus, Onesimus experienced a phase of misery even deeper than in the slave-prison of Antium. Once more he was the companion of felons of every dye and fugitives of every nationality. Every day came the severe drill, the coarse food which was worse than hunger, the odious society of hardened ruffians, the recounting of the brutal tragedies with which they were familiar. Among them all he found but one whose society he could tolerate. He was a dark-haired, blue-eyed Briton, young like himself, but in all other respects unlike him. For Æquoreus, as they called him, was full of manly pride and hardihood, and had none of the subtle softness of the Asiatic in his temperament. He had been reduced to his hard lot for no other crime than the outburst of a passionate independence. He had been brought over with Caractacus, as one of the Britons pre-eminent in stature and beauty to grace the ovation of Claudius and Aulus Plautius. He had not been treated cruelly, for the admiration inspired by the dauntless bearing of the British king had secured protection to his countrymen; but Glanydon — to give him his Silurian name — loathed the effeminate luxuries of Rome, and, forgetting that he was a captive, had once struck in the face a Prætorian officer who insulted him. For this offence he had been first scourged and then handed over to the master

of the gladiators. It was ordered that he should fight, as soon as he was trained, in some great display. Onesimus saw that the young Briton shared his own disgust at the orgies of ribald talk in which their fellows indulged. The two had no other friends, and they were drawn together for mutual defence against the rude horse-play of their comrades. Glanydon was one of the class of gladiators called Samnites, who fought in heavy armour, while, after various trials, the trainer (*lanista*) decided that the exceptional activity of Onesimus marked him out for the work of a net-thrower (*retiarius*). Their training had to be hurried on at the utmost speed, for the games were to take place within a month.

The other gladiators sometimes talked of their lot with pretended rapture. They spoke of the liberal supply of food, of the presents sent them, of the favour with which they were regarded by fair ladies — even by the wives and daughters of great patricians — of the fame they acquired, so that their prowess and the comparison of their merits was one of the commonest topics of talk at Roman dinner-parties. They boasted of the delight of seeing their likenesses painted in red on the play-bills; of the shouts with which a favourite fighter was welcomed; of the yell of applause which greeted them when they had performed a gallant feat; of the chance of retiring with wreaths and gifts and money, when they had earned by their intrepidity the wooden foil.[1]

'Poor wretches,' said Onesimus to Glanydon; 'they do not talk of the panic which sometimes seizes them, and how they are howled at when, in ignominious defeat, they fly to the end of the arena to beg for their lives; how, when they see overwhelming odds against them and grim death staring them in the face, they are still driven into the fight with cracking scourges and plates of iron heated red hot; nor — but what is the use of talking of all this, Glanydon? you know it all better than I do.'

'Brutal, bloody, slaves and women, are these Romans,' cried Glanydon. 'The Druids of my native land served the gods with cruel rites, but they did not play with death as though it were a pretty toy, as these weaklings do. And to think

[1] Note 35. — The Gladiators' School.

that by arms and discipline they conquered my countrymen! Oh, for one hour again under Caradoc or under Boudicca! I would never leave another field alive.'

'You do not, then, fear death?' said Onesimus.

'Why should I? What has life for me? The maiden I loved is in her hut on my Silurian hills. I shall never see her more, nor set foot on those purple mist-clad mountains. I shall be butchered to amuse these swine. Death! No,' he said, while he indignantly dashed away the tear which had burst forth at the thought of his home — 'I do not fear death, but I hate to die thus.'

'Did your Druids think that death ended all?'

Glanydon turned his blue eyes on the speaker. 'I do not think they did. There were mysteries which they hid from us. But' . . .

With amazement Onesimus saw him sketch in the dust the helmet of a mirmillo, of which the crest was a dolphin. The Phrygian said nothing, but scratched in the dust the same symbol. Glanydon started up and seized his hand. 'A Christian?' he asked in amazement; 'and yet here?'

'You too are here,' said Onesimus, hanging his head.

'Ah, yes!' said the Briton; 'but surely for no crime. What could I do but strike a wretch viler than a worm? Nor have I been illuminated — my teacher would not baptise me till he could see proof that I had controlled the fierce outbursts of passion.'

'Your teacher?'

'There came from Jerusalem an old white-haired man. They called him Joseph. He had seen the Christ; he had buried Him in his own tomb. — But you, Onesimus?'

'I am no better than a renegade. My own follies have brought me here. There is no more hope for me. Ask me no more.'

'Do you fear death?' asked the Briton. 'If so, I pity your lot.'

'The gods — or God if there be but one God — cannot be *worse* than men,' answered Onesimus gloomily.

Glanydon was silent. After a pause, he said, 'I am a rude barbarian, as they call me here; yet he who taught me spoke much of "love for all and hope for all."'

Onesimus sat with bowed head, and the Briton was moved.

'We are brothers,' he said. 'Even in this hell we can love one another.'

But one sickening thought was in the breasts of both of them. They had sat side by side in daily intercourse; their common friendlessness, their common sympathies, had thrown them together in the closest bonds, and those bonds had been strengthened by the discovery that both had been taught at least the rudiments of a holy faith. But the day of the games was rapidly approaching, and the chances of the lot, or the caprice of the Prætor, might easily cause them to be pitted against each other. It was horrible to think that either of them might be compelled to drive sword or dagger into the throat or heart of his friend.

'Supposing that we are matched together?' said Glanydon, the evening before the display.

'Then we must fight,' said Onesimus. 'Have we not taken the oath "to be bound, to be burned, to be scourged, to be slain," or do anything else that is required of us as legitimate gladiators, giving up alike our souls and our bodies?'[1]

'Which of us will win?' asked Glanydon, with a sad smile.

'You,' said the Phrygian. 'You are stronger than I am, and taller.'

'Yes, but you are quicker and more active, and you can't tell how I hate that net of yours. I know you will catch me in it —'

'If I do, you will still have fought so well that the people will all turn down their thumbs, and you will be spared. A tall fine fellow like you is just the gladiator whom the Roman ladies like to look at, and they won't have you killed in your first fight. But as for me — a mere Phrygian slave! — Yes, Glanydon, to-morrow your short sword will perhaps be red with my blood.'

'Never!' said Glanydon. 'I will fight because I must, and will do my best; and when my blood is up I might kill you or any other opponent in the blind heat of the combat; but as for slaughtering in cold blood I could not do it — least of all could I murder the friend I love.'

'You won't be able to help yourself, Glanydon. And we netsmen (worse luck!) have our faces uncovered. Many of

[1] Note 36. — The Gladiator's Oath.

the spectators, like the late "divine" Claudius, as they call him, like to see us killed, because our dying expression is not concealed by a helmet.'

'But why should we not both escape?' asked the Briton. 'Perhaps before this time to-morrow we may each be the happy possessor of the ivory ticket with "*Sp.*"[1] upon it, or even of the palm and the foil. Who knows but what by our bravery we may be *rude donati?*'

'Don't you know, then, that to-morrow's games will very likely be *sine missione?* We must either die or kill.'

The Briton had not been aware of it. He sank into gloomy silence. Onesimus gently laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, and said, 'Well, perhaps, like Priscus and Verrus, we may both be victors and both vanquished. *Pugnavere pares, succubuere pares.*'

Glanydon shook his head. He said, 'Let us talk no more, or we shall both be unmanned. Life — death — to-morrow; the *rudis* or the stab? Which shall it be?'

'It is in God's hands,' said Onesimus, 'if what we have been taught is true.'

With that awful issue before them, overshadowed by misgivings and almost with despair, finding life horrible, yet shrinking from the death which neither of them dared to regard with full Christian hope, the two youths lay down on their pallets. Before they closed their eyes in sleep, each of them had breathed some sort of unuttered cry into the dim unknown.

[1] For *Spectatus* — a gladiator who had made his *début* in the arena.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE FIGHT IN THE ARENA

'Quid vesani sibi vult ars impia ludi ?
Quid mortes juvenum ? quid sanguine parta voluptas ?'
PRUDENTIUS.
'Mera homicidia sunt.'—SENECA, *Ep.* 7.

THE morning broke in cloudless splendour. Long before the dawn thousands of the Roman populace had thronged into the amphitheatre to secure the best places. The City Præfect was known to be a man of taste and a favourite of Nero, and the Emperor himself was certain to grace the display with his idolised presence. The pairs of gladiators were not numerous, nor were there many wild beasts; but everything was to be choice of its kind, and it was rumoured that some beautiful foreign youths were to make their first appearance as fighters.

About eleven o'clock the rays of the sun became too strong for comfort, and a huge awning, decorated with gay streamers, was drawn over the audience by gilded cords.

By this time the amphitheatre, except the seats reserved for distinguished persons, was thronged from the lowest seats to the topmost ambulatory, where stood a dense array of slaves and of the lowest proletariat. They did not get tired of waiting, for the scene was one of continual bustle and brightness, as group after group of burghers, in their best array, took their seats with their wives and families. Any well-known patrician or senator was greeted with applause or with hisses. The buzz of general conversation sometimes rose into a roar of laughter, and sometimes sank into a hush of expectancy. Little incidents kept occurring every moment. Interlopers tried to thrust themselves into the fourteen rows of seats which were set apart for the knights, and an altercation often ensued between the seat-keeper, Oceanus, and these impostors. Now the people laughed at the unceremonious

way in which he shook one of them who, to escape notice, had pretended to be asleep. They were still more amused when the impatient official turned out a finely dressed personage who protested that he was a knight, but unluckily dropped in the scuffle a large key, which showed him to be a slave.

At last the shouting of the multitude who thronged about the principle entrance announced the arrival of the Præfect. Amid the acclamations of the populace, the magnificent procession by which Pedanius was accompanied passed round the arena to the reserved seats. Pedanius was scarcely seated, when the Emperor, surrounded by a group of his most brilliant courtiers, took his place in the imperial box. As the roar of applause continued, he rose again and again with his hand on his heart, to bow and cringe before the public — *omnia serviliter pro imperio.* For the mob of Rome was at once his master and his slave, and was as ready at slight excuse to burst into open menaces as into blasphemous adulation. Nero was as well aware as Tiberius that 'he was only holding a wolf by the ears;' and he often quoted the saying of that keen observer, that few realised 'what a monster Empire was.'

Then Pedanius rose in his seat and flung down the scarlet napkin which was the signal that the sports were to begin.

The opening amusements were harmless and curious. First a number of German aurochs were led round the circus. They had been trained to stand still while boys hung from their huge horns, or danced and fenced standing on their broad backs. A tiger was guided by its keeper with a chain of flowers. Four chariots swept past in succession, the first drawn by leopards with gay silken harness, the second by stags champing golden bits, the third by shaggy bisons, the fourth by four camels who amused the people by their expression of supercilious disapproval. Then an elephant performed some clumsy dances under the bidding of its black keeper. Next a winged boy led in a wild boar by a purple halter. Last of all, a tame lion was introduced, which, to the delight of the shouting populace, dandled a hare in its paws without hurting it, and then suffered its keeper to put his head and his hand in its open mouth. But at this point a frightful tragedy occurred.

Wherever the dazzling white sand of the arena chanced to have been disturbed or stained, it was raked smooth, and fresh sand sprinkled, by boys dressed as Cupids with glittering wings. One of these boys, presuming on the lion's tameness, hit it rather sharply with his rake. The royal brute had been already excited by hearing the howling of the animals of all sorts with which the *vivarium* was crowded, as well as by the shouts of the spectators, and its keeper had stupidly neglected to notice the signs of its rising rage. But when the sharp edge of the rake struck it, the lion's mane bristled, and with a terrific snarl he first laid the poor lad dead with one stroke of his paw, and then sprang with a mighty bound upon a second lad, on whose quivering limbs he fleshed his claws and teeth.[1] A cry of horror and alarm rose from the people, and those who sat just above the level of the amphitheatre started up in terror, for they were only protected from the wild beasts by rails, which had been finished off with amber and silver, but did not look very strong. The brute, which had thus shown 'a wild trick of its ancestors,' was soon overpowered, for the keeper was skilled in the use of the lasso. But this incident did but whet the appetite of the spectators for blood. They shouted to Pedanius to begin the *venatio* and the wild-beast fights which formed the morning show. No expense had been spared to sate the insatiable cruelty of the mob. For an hour or two longer they were gratified with a prodigality of anguish. Ostriches and giraffes were chased round and round, and shot to death with arrows. Wild beasts fought with tame beasts and with wild beasts, and beasts with men. Bears, lions, and tigers were worried and hacked by armed *bestiarii*, and sometimes a *bestiarius* in his turn lay rolling on the sand, crushed by a bear or torn by the fierce struggles of a panther. Lastly, some unskilled, defenceless criminals were turned loose into the amphitheatre amid a fresh batch of animals, infuriated by hunger and mad with excitement. None of the poor weaponless wretches — *sine armis, sine arte, seminudi* — could stand up for a moment against the bear's hug or the tiger's leaps. They stood in attitudes of despairing stupefaction, watching the horrible rolling gait of the bears, or the crouching of the tigers as they glared on them with yellow eyeballs and bristling manes, lashing their haunches with their tails, and at last,

[1] *Mart.* ii. 75.

with a hoarse carnivorous roar, curving their backs for the final spring. The *venatio* degenerated into a mere butchery meant to fill up the time.[1]

All this was regarded as child's play in comparison with the luxury of courage, skill, and massacre which was expected in the afternoon; but it was already too much for one of the spectators. This was the philosophic thaumaturge Apollonius of Tyana, who happened to be paying a brief visit to Pætus Thrasea. Thrasea had been compelled to be present, because he knew that everything which he did or failed to do was watched with deadly suspicion; and Apollonius had accompanied his host from a desire to see the strange animals which were to be exhibited. At first he had looked on with real delight and interest; but when he saw the noble creatures wantonly killed, his Greek instinct for the beautiful was disgusted. He had been shocked by the callousness with which the vast audience had recovered from its momentary fright when the two poor boys had been slain by the lions; but when he saw them shouting with delight while the arena was wet with the blood of mangled men and tortured beasts, he turned his back on the amphitheatre with disdain and horror, and whispered in the ear of his companion, 'Rome is a Bacchante rolling in blood and mud.'

Of all these scenes Onesimus and Glanydon had been spectators; and such spectacles were little calculated to dispel the gloom of dreadful anticipation which hung over the coming afternoon. They had marched in the procession of gladiators which formed part of the opening pomp, and from behind a lattice-work of one of the dressing-rooms they could see all that was going on. But now the rays of the early summer were pouring a dazzling flood of warmth and light which penetrated even through the awning. The vast audience required a little rest. The awning was sprinkled with perfumes. Saffron-water fell in a delicate dew upon the hot and tired multitude. The passages between the seats were flushed with pure cold water. Refreshments and baskets of fruit were freely handed about, and while they were enjoying the light mid-day meal every one chatted freely with his neighbour.

'Who are those in the *podium* with the Emperor?' asked

[1] Note 37. — Gladiatorial Games.

a provincial from Gaul of the young Spaniard who sat beside him.

'Don't you know?' said Martial, for he it was. 'That well-dressed, handsome, smiling man is Petronius. The tall senator with the intellectual face is Seneca. He is a countryman of whom I am proud.'

'Seneca!' said the provincial; 'the greatest man of his age! Only to think that I have seen Seneca!'

Martial only smiled. Such enthusiasm was refreshing.

'The young man with black hair who sits just behind him with a frown on his forehead is his nephew Lucan, the poet. The king in purple robe is Herod Agrippa II., with his lovely sister Berenice by his side. Just watch the flash of that diamond on her neck. That splendid fellow with fair hair, all smiles, who has grace and beauty in every movement, is the actor Paris, and beside him is his friend and rival, Aliturus. The exquisite, who looks as if he would be paralyzed by the weight of his own rings, is Senecio.'

'And that lady with her face half veiled, so that you only catch a glimpse now and then of her loveliness?'

'That is Poppæa, Otho's wife. No wonder Nero loves her better than that pale sad lady who sits among the six vestals.'

'Yet she, too, is young and beautiful. Who is she?'

'The Empress.'

'Octavia, the daughter of Claudius? May the gods bless her!'

The provincial gazed long at Octavia.

'But now tell me,' he continued, 'who is that purpureal personage, with large rings, scarlet boots, and a very white forehead?'

Martial laughed aloud. 'His forehead may well be white,' he said. 'Do you know what it is made of?'

'Made of?' asked the young Gaul in astonishment.

'Yes. It is made of sticking-plaster! If you took it off, what do you think you would see under it?'

'His skin, I suppose.'

'His skin, yes! But with three letters on it.'

'What three letters?'

'*O Simplicitas!*' said Martial; 'the three letters F. U. R.'

'Is he a thief?' asked the Gaul. 'Then why do they let him sit there among the knights?'

'Because his thieving has made him rich,' answered Martial.

'But his riches don't make him honest; and every one seems to be treating him with great respect.'

Martial laughed long and loud. '*O Sapientia!*' he exclaimed, '*O Innocentia!* From what new Atlantis do you come? Don't you know that at Rome the rule always is "Riches first, virtue next"?'

'If that be the rule at Rome,' said the other, 'I should prefer to live at Ulubræ or at Venta Belgarum.'

But Martial had no more time to listen to a morality so refreshingly unsophisticated. 'Hush!' he said. 'They are going to scatter down the presents and the lottery tickets on us.'

First came a shower of countless coins of thin metal, every one of which was stamped with a wanton image. Then all kinds of little presents like those exchanged at the Saturnalia. The audience did not exert themselves to catch these, but it was very different when handfuls of lottery tickets were flung among them. For these they scrambled wildly, and with many a curse and blow; for he who secured one might find himself the happy possessor of a slave, a statue, a fine vase, a rare foreign bird, a suit of armour, a Molossian dog, a Spanish horse, or even a villa; although the mystery which the number concealed could not be made known till he presented the ticket the next day.

But by this time the attendants with rakes were scraping the surface of the arena smooth, and sprinkling it afresh with dazzling white sand brought in ship-loads from Africa, to hide the crimson stains of the life-blood of animals and men. For now was to begin the splendid exhibition of strength and skill and pluck, and the awful pageantry of death, under that blue sky, under that gleaming sunlight; and men and women were preparing themselves to be thrilled with sanguinary and voluptuous excitement which would make the blood course through their veins like fire. Most of the gladiators were men of approved prowess, stalwart and well known; and from the senators' seats to the topmost gallery bets were being freely laid on their chances of victory, and on those who should be

left dead at evening, indifferent forever to those wild shouts. The only two who were not *spectati* — the only two tiros who were to make their appearance were the young British captive and the young Phrygian slave.

The long defiant blast of a trumpet smote the air; the folding doors of the main entrance were flung open, and, headed by their trainer, the gladiators in a body marched in proud procession and with firm steps to the space beneath the podium, on which stood the gilded chair of the Emperor. They were only sixty in number, but had been selected for their skill and physique, and belonged to various classes of gladiators. They were clad in glittering array — their helmets, their shields, and even their greaves, richly embossed and gilded.

And none were more curiously scanned than Onesimus, who walked last of the net-throwers, and Glanydon, who closed the file of the Samnites. It was impossible not to observe the towering stature and herculean mould of the Briton, the lithe and sinewy frame of the dark-eyed Asiatic. Then the Prætor once more flung down the napkin, in sign that the fighting should begin. Grouped under the Emperor's seat, they all uplifted to him their right hands and chanted in monotone their sublime greeting: 'Hail, Cæsar! we who are about to die salute thee!'

Nero flung them a careless glance, and scarcely broke the animated conversation which he was holding with Petronius.

Before the hard fighting began there was some preliminary skirmishing among all the gladiators, with blunt weapons, merely to display their skill; and a pair of *andabatæ* amused the people by their difficulties in fighting practically blindfold, for their loose helmets had no eyelet-holes.

Then the trumpet blew once more, and a herald cried out, 'Lay aside your blunt swords and fight with sharp swords;' and Pedanius examined the weapons to see that they were duly sharp. The display began with the contests of the horsemen and the charioteers (*essedarii*). It was not long before two of the chariots were broken, and their wounded occupants flung down under the hoofs of their own plunging horses.

Next, two horsemen, both of them popular favourites, of

well-tried prowess and well-matched strength, rode out on white horses to fight each other in mortal conflict. Hippias wore a short mantle of blue, and rode from the east side of the arena; Aruns, in a red mantle, rode from the western side. Both wore on their heads golden helmets, and military standards were carried before them.[1] The combat between them was long and fierce, for each knew that it was to be his last. They charged each other furiously, raining on heads and shoulders a tempest of blows, till, after a tremendous bout, Aruns thrust his spear through a joint in the armour of Hippias, and the stream of crimson blood which followed was greeted by the roar of 'Habet!' from eighty thousand throats. The rider fell lifeless. He required no finishing stroke, and the mob cried, 'Peractum est!' ('There's an end of him!') This contest had excited much interest from the fame of the fighters, and large sums of money changed hands on the result. One of the senators, named Cæcina, had hit on an ingenious way of telling his distant friends whether they had lost or gained. Since Hippias was in blue, and Aruns in red, he had carried with him into the amphitheatre a number of swallows in two cages, of which some were painted blue and some red; and, since Aruns had slain his adversary, he let loose those which were painted red.[2]

After this the other mounted gladiators joined combat. In a very short time nearly all were wounded, and three acknowledged their defeat. Dropping their swords or javelins, they upheld their clenched hands with one finger extended to plead for mercy. The plea was vain. No handkerchief was waved in sign of mercy, and, standing over them, the victors callously drove their swords into the throats of their defeated comrades. The poor conquered fighters did not shrink. They looked up at the shouting populace with something of disdain on their faces, as though to prove that they thought nothing of death, and did not wish to be pitied. To see that none were shamming dead, a figure entered disguised as Charon, who smote them with his hammer; but the work of the sword had been done too faithfully — he only smote the corpses of the slain.[3]

By this time the whole atmosphere of the place seemed to reek with the suffocating fumes of blood, which acted like

[1] See Isidor. *Orig.* xviii. 53.
[2] Pliny, *N. H.* x. 34.
[3] Note 38. — Dead Gladiators.

intoxication on the brutalised passions of the multitude. They awaited with savage eagerness the next combat, which was to be the main show of the afternoon. Twelve Samnites and mirmillos were to be matched against as many net-throwers and chasers; and the contest was all the more thrilling because the latter were very lightly clad, so that every wound and gash was visible in all its horror on their naked limbs, while the unhelmed faces showed every triumphant or agonised expression which swept across them in that stormy scene.

After half an hour's fighting in terrible earnest, in which each side had exchanged many a well-aimed blow, and had shown prodigies of skill, valour, and swiftness, many of the gladiators had fallen, and others dropped their arms in sign of defeat. Their vanquishers strode over them awaiting the signal to be executioners of their brethren. The fight was stopped till the signal had been given with ruthless unanimity. The defeated men, like those who had been killed before them, gazed without blenching on the hard and lolling multitude, as though to show by their calm demeanour how easy a thing it was to die.

But to make sure that they had been really killed, once more a slave entered, who, for variety's sake, was dressed in the wings and carried the serpent-rod of Mercury. He touched each corpse with a red-hot iron wand. No limb shrank from his touch. Other attendants, therefore, laid the dead on biers — which the admiring spectators observed to be inlaid with amber — and they were carried out through the gate of Libitina into the spoliarium, where they were carelessly flung out in a heap.[1]

So far both the tiros had escaped. They had instinctively avoided each other, and neither had butchered his opponent except in fair fight. Of the eight who survived, four were Samnites and mirmillos, four were net-throwers. They thought that the fight was over and that they might severally be regarded as victors, and might look for the gifts of crowns and money, or even of the foil which set them free from the horrid trade. They stepped back beyond the lines which the trainer had marked, resting on their arms, and expecting to be ushered out of the triumphal gate.

[1] Sen. *Ep.* xciii. 12; Quinct. *Decl.* 7.

The multitude had far other intentions. They were not yet sated with slaughter; they had not yet gloated long enough on faces convulsed with the death-agony; they wanted to see how the beautiful young Phrygian would look when an opponent stood over him with a sword at his throat.

But the soul of Glanydon was filled with disgust and disdain. He loathed those fat, shouting, comfortable burghers, those hard-faced women, those finical dandies, of whom he felt that he could have driven a score before him like sheep. He strode to the barriers and set his back against them, refusing to fight.

A yell of fury rose from the people. 'Kill him!' they shouted. 'Kill him! scourge him! burn him! Why is he so afraid of cold steel? Why can't he die like a man? Ho! scourgers, lash the youth into the combat again, to make the sides equal.'

The Briton stood as in a dream, and as his thoughts reverted to his home and the maiden whom he loved, the amphitheatre swam before his eyes. Five or six mastigophori came running up to him, and he felt the curling lash of one of them come stinging round his body. The agony aroused him. With a cry as of a wounded lion he sprang on the scourger, and with one buffet laid him senseless, while the others fled in confusion before him. Then, with the boldness of despair, he strode under the podium, and, raised his clenched fist, cursed the Emperor aloud.

'Murderer of thy mother!' he cried; 'thou infamy of manhood, I will fight again. But think not that thou shalt escape. Speedily the doom shall overtake thee, and thy death shall be more shameful and horrible than mine.'

He had thundered forth so loudly his indignant words that they rang through the whole amphitheatre, and the wildest tumult arose. The Emperor cowered back in his seat, pale with superstitious terror, yet almost suffocated with rage; and his favourite page, springing up from the low stool at his feet, began to sprinkle his face with perfume.

The Prætorians drew their swords, and in one moment would have slain the criminal who thus dared to blaspheme their human god. That a common gladiator — a thing to flesh men's swords upon — should dare to curse the Emperor! It was a portent! But there was no time to interfere, for, with

a shout, Glanydon sprang back among the gladiators, and began so furious an affray that the other side gave way and fled. He sprang on an opponent, and the crimson rush that followed his sword-thrust again awoke the deep 'Habet!' of the excited crowd. But as he pressed on, now blind with fury, he fell, face forward, over the loose helmet of a slain mirmillo, and before he could recover himself a netsman, seizing his opportunity, flung his net, entangled the limbs of the Briton by a dexterous twist, and, without waiting for any signal, drove his trident into his breast. The Briton died without a groan. But the advantage of the light-armed fighters was only momentary. Their courage had been daunted by Glanydon, and, after a few moments of flight and fight, the Samnites were victorious and the net-throwers were all wounded and dropped their arms, except Onesimus. They knelt with their forefingers uplifted, and, as they had fought with courage and had been hardly used, handkerchiefs began to be waved in their favour and thumbs to be turned downwards. Octavia and Acte had both recognised the face of Onesimus as he retreated before one of the Samnites, and failed to entangle him by the throw of his net. Filled with pity, they turned their thumbs downward in sign that the combat should be stopped and the lives of the defeated be spared.

But unhappily Onesimus was only a few feet distant from Nero, and Nero had recognised him too. The curse of Glanydon had shaken the Emperor's nerves. He was in a peculiarly brutal mood, and, with thumb turned towards his breast, he gave the fatal sign that the four netsmen should be slain. Three of them were so deeply wounded already that their limbs were bathed in blood, and without an instant's pause the Samnites thrust their swords through them to the hilt. But the sight seemed to inspire Onesimus with some divine despair. He seized his trident and dagger — he had already gathered the net round his shoulder — and, springing towards one of the Samnites, flung, entangled, tripped, and stabbed him. Plucking his trident from the wound, but not waiting to recover his net, he flew on the second and smote him down. The third, who was already staggering from a wound received earlier in the fight dropped his arms and upheld his forefinger, and, before the fourth could recover from his amazement,

Onesimus, leaving the defeated combatant, had again seized his net and chased his opponent with it in act to throw. Being far superior in speed, he swiftly overtook him, flung the net and, hurling his opponent to the ground, brandished his dagger over him. The peopled walls of the amphitheatre rang with shouts of delight and admiration. Never had they seen a more astonishing and gallant feat. This retiarius — and he a mere tiro — had, single-handed, defeated four Samnites in succession. The thing was unheard of. Every thumb was turned up for Onesimus to give the finishing stroke to his conquered enemy, and thousands of voices clamoured that, as the sole surviving victor of the combat, he should be rewarded with the palm and foil.

But the brief spasm of wrath was over. Onesimus could not and would not butcher his comrades in cold blood. He recognised in the young Samnite a gladiator named Kalendio, one of the least objectionable of his fellows in the school — the only one who had never gone out of his way to annoy or taunt him. At the same moment he caught sight of the body of Glanydon. A rush of tears blinded him; he flung down net and dagger and trident, and, retreating to the barrier, stood there with folded arms. The acclamations which had greeted his prowess were followed by a groan of astonishment and disappointment. Kalendio had by this time torn and cut himself free from the net, and sprang upon the unhappy Phrygian who had spared his life. Onesimus did not resist him or appeal for mercy; the Samnite, who was an utter stranger to the scruples and compunctions which had led Onesimus to spare him, drove his sword into him; life and sense flowed from him, and he fell heavily upon the bloody sand.

CHAPTER XL

THE SPOLIARIUM

'Sanguinem quoque gladiatorum bibunt, ut viventibus poculis, comitiales morbi . . . At hercule illi ex homine ipso sorbere efficacissimum putant calidum spirantemque, et una ipsam animam ex osculo vulnerum.'—PLINY, *N. H.* xxviii. 2.

A FEW days before the scene described in the last chapter there had been gladness in the bright but humble home of Pudens. He had risen to the rank of a primipilar centurion, and was now in a position to ask the British king Caradoc for the hand of his lovely Claudia. He had only delayed his nuptials until he felt himself able to give his bride a secure and fitting home. Everything was fresh and beautiful in the adornments of the house. The atrium was full of flowers and statues, the door was hung with garlands, the frescoes in the tablinum and triclinium were all new. No mythological scene had been admitted, but the walls of the triclinium were painted with festoons of fruit and flowers and trellises of roses, among which little winged genii held their sports; and the tablinum with scenes of street life and the toils of agriculture, and purple vineyards, as perfect as the pencil of Dorotheus could make them. One little corner of the fresco was universally admired as a masterpiece. Pudens had asked the painter to imitate one of the vases of iridescent glass which were then in fashion, and, in honour of Claudia, to fill it with lilies. Pudens had greatly admired a similar painting on the wall of the house of Germanicus on the Palatine (where it may be seen to this day), and in reproducing it Dorotheus had surpassed himself.

The betrothal had taken place some time before, and on that occasion Pudens had given to his future bride a golden necklace of old Etrurian workmanship, with pendants of amethyst.

It gleamed round her fair neck as she sat waiting for the bridal summons in her father's house, trying to dispel the gloom which fell on the old king when he recalled that he was losing for a time the light of his home.

All the ordinary conventions of a Roman marriage were carried out, except such as were purely pagan. Claudia was dressed in a long white tunic with purple fringe, bound round the waist with an embroidered girdle. Her bridal veil and her shoes were of bright yellow, as custom required, and the long fair hair which fell over her shoulders had been duly parted with the point of a spear. It was evening, and the three youths who were to accompany her stood laughing in the vestibule, and ready to start. One of them was Titus, who was to carry before her a torch of white-thorn; the other two were Flavius Clemens and young Aulus Plautius, who walked on either side to support her arms. The fourth lad, who was called the camillus, and who carried in a vase some of the bride's jewels and childish playthings, was Marcus, the bright little son of Seneca. She herself bore in her hand a distaff and spindle full of wool, as a type of domestic industry. Outside the door waited her friends, five of whom carried wax candles and the others pine-wood torches. And so, with songs and laughter and snatches of the old Thalassio, the happy procession made its way through the streets till they reached the door of Pudens. When she had wound wool round the doorposts and touched them with wolf's fat, his groomsmen — who were chiefly his brother-officers — lifted Claudia across the threshold to prevent any ill-omened stumble. Within the vestibule stood Pudens, with fire and water. These she had to touch, as symbols of purification, which might be regarded as Christian no less than pagan; and then she spoke the marriage formula — 'Where thou art Gaius I am Gaia.' After this she was led to a seat upon an outspread sheepskin, and Pudens handed to her the keys of the house. The bridal supper followed, and its mirth was none the less sparkling from its perfect innocence.

By the wish of both Pudens and Claudia, the slaves of the household were invited to have their share in the festivities, which lasted for several days. But the newly wedded pair had in store for Nereus and his daughter

Junia a bliss which they had not dared to anticipate. At the close of the week of rejoicing he bade them, with a smile, to accompany him to the Prætor's tribunal. The order could have but one meaning — that he meant to set them free. The tears rushed into the old slave's eyes. Nereus and Junia had, indeed, learnt to be content with any condition to which God called them, but now that liberty had spontaneously been offered they felt an almost incommunicable joy.

Pudens sympathised with them in their emotion, and, with a few cheering words, bade them walk behind him towards the Forum. The ceremony of emancipation was very brief. The centurion stated to the Prætor that he wished to manumit Nereus and Junia — of whom the latter had been born in his house — for their great merits and long faithfulness. The Prætor's lictor laid a rod on each of their heads, with a slight blow, and turned them each round; then the Prætor declared them free in accordance with the right of citizens, and they became *liberti*. On their return home, the rest of the *familia*, formerly their fellow-slaves, received them with showers of sweetmeats and clapping of hands and congratulations, and were allowed to hold one more humble banquet in their honour.

Nereus still wished to serve Pudens and Claudia as their freedman; but it was arranged that he should live in lodgings near the house. He and Junia soon made the new home of their freedom look as pleasant as their circumstances admitted, and one evening they were sitting hand in hand thanking the Lord of their life for His mercy, when a timid knock was heard. Opening the door, Junia saw a pretty slave-girl, who asked to speak with her in private. Junia had known her as one of the slaves of Pedanius Secundus, and felt the deepest pity for her because she was afflicted with epilepsy — a disease which among the ancients was so ill-omened as to be the cause of endless trouble and distress.

There was but one remedy for the disease which the ancients thought perfectly efficacious, and it is conceivable that the desperate nature of this remedy may have had some mysterious effect upon the nerves, and have proved in some cases to be a real cure through its influence on the mind of the sufferer. It was to drink blood from a recent wound.

The consequences of a fit of epilepsy were disastrous. It was called the comitial disease, because its occurrence put an end to the most important business of the commonwealth by necessitating the dissolution of any public assembly. Consequently, persons so afflicted were condemned to a life of misery, and could never move about with freedom. Their presence in a house was regarded as a misfortune, and they were sometimes got rid of to save trouble. The pretty face and winning ways of poor young Syra had saved her, but since she heard of the supposed cure for her malady her one desire had been to avail herself of it.

This had made her go frequently to the games of the amphitheatre, and linger near the gate of Libitina, through which the confector, who had, when necessary, to give the finishing stroke, dragged the dead and wounded gladiators into the spoliarium. She had thus attracted the notice of the young slave Phlegon, who held this horrible office.

That he did so was not his own fault. He too was a slave of Pedanius, who had cruelly degraded him to this place in the amphitheatre as a punishment for a trivial offence, followed by an outbreak of resentment, when, in his younger days, he had been a favourite cup-bearer of his master. It would be useless to aver that his character had not been somewhat brutalised by the hideous duties forced upon him; but he regarded himself as the victim of necessity, and therefore as not responsible — a view not without a grim element of truth in the case of a pagan slave. Seeing Syra as she lingered about the amphitheatre, he had been struck by her helpless prettiness, and she had learnt to admire a face which still retained its good looks, if not its good expression. They fell in love with each other; but when she was forced to tell him of her misfortune, he declared all question of marriage to be impossible unless she were cured of her comitial disease. He had himself persuaded her to come this evening to the spoliarium after the games, and to try the remedy which alone seemed to offer any chance of success.

But poor Syra dared not go alone through the darkening, crowded, and vicious streets, and thought that Junia, as she was now a freedwoman, could protect her. Junia was always actuated by the principle as well as by the instinct of kindness. Not guessing the object of the girl's errand, but

knowing her hapless love for Phlegon, she consented to accompany her. It cost her a pang to leave her father on that happy evening, but she knew that with him, no less than with herself, the claims of charity were paramount, and all the more towards those who seemed to need it most.

'Could you find no better youth to love than one of so dire a trade, Syra?' she gently asked the girl, as, with their heads covered with shawls, they went in the deepening dusk down the Via Sacra towards the amphitheatre.

'It is not his fault, Junia. He hates it. His heart is naturally pitiful. He was brought up in the midst of luxury in the house of Pedanius, where he was a favourite. But Pedanius is a wretch, and once he treated Phlegon so cruelly that, in a fit of rage, the boy struck him. He might have been crucified for it, or flung to the lampreys; but, instead of that, Pedanius made him take to this work in the amphitheatre. How else could he live?'

'There are some lives worse than death,' said Junia.

'Well,' answered Syra; 'many a time he has longed to stab himself with his own sword; but . . . he loves me.'

'I did not mean that he should have killed himself,' said Junia; 'none of us have a right to fling away the life which God gives us. I meant that it would be worth while facing any risk to escape doing wrong.'

'Nothing can be wrong which our masters make us do,' answered Syra simply; and Junia could only sigh, for she knew that this was an axiom with both slaves and their masters.

By this time they had reached the outer door of the spoliarium, and, in answer to a whispered watchword, Phlegon admitted Syra, who promised to return very speedily, while Junia waited for her outside.

A few moments only had elapsed when Syra sprang out of the door agitated and breathless.

'Oh, Junia!' she cried; 'I did it! I did it!'

'Did what?'

'I have drunk some blood from a fresh wound, and I am cured.'

'Horrible!' said Junia, with a shudder, now for the first time understanding what Syra had come for.

'Yes; it *was* horrible,' said the girl; 'but how could I help

it? Every one who saw me in a fit, however slight, used to spit so as to avert the omen. I tried everything first. I tried galbanum, garlic, hellebore; I ate some young swallows; I tried to get a bit of the liver of an elephant, or the brain of a camel, which they say is a certain remedy.[1] But how could I? Never mind! I am cured now. But oh, Junia!' exclaimed the girl, 'as he lay there' —

'As *who* lay there?'

'The young gladiator who fought so bravely to-day, and was dragged out by the hook as dead — well, he is not dead! His limbs were warm. I put my hand on his heart; there was a faint pulse.'

'But who is he?'

'I thought you knew him, for he was once a slave in your house — that young Phrygian.'

'Onesimus!' exclaimed Junia, with a startled cry.

'Yes; that was his name. Did you not know that he fought as a net-thrower to-day?'

'No,' she answered faintly. 'We never go to the games. I had long lost sight of him, and thought that he had left Rome, or was dead. Syra, save him!'

'Phlegon will be glad to save him, if it can be done undiscovered. He loathes stabbing the poor gladiators when they have not quite been killed. Yet, if it were discovered that he spared but one of them, he would certainly be torn to pieces or crucified.'

Junia's mind was instantly made up. At all costs, Onesimus should have such chance of life secured to him as nature rendered possible. She told Syra to let Phlegon speak with her. Entering the spoliarium, and repressing the awful sense of repugnance which almost made her faint as the dim light of his lamp glimmered over the heap of mangled corpses, she recognised the features of Onesimus, and convinced herself that the spark of life was not wholly quenched in him. Then, putting into the hand of the confector a gold coin which had been the gift of Claudia, she entreated him to let her come back and remove the hapless youth. He consented, and touched by her anguish, he himself took the body of the gladiator in his arms, laid him on his own pallet of straw, and poured some common Sabine wine down his throat. Junia,

[1] Pliny, *N. H.* xxiii. 63 and *passim.*

meanwhile, thankful now for the slave-girl's company, went to the house of Linus, which was near at hand, and implored his aid. The good old pastor readily consented, and, when it was quite dark, took a mule and went with the two girls to the door of the spoliarium, where Phlegon awaited them.

He had not been idle. With such rough kindness as was possible to him he had washed away in tepid water the stains of blood from the breast and face of the poor gladiator, and had bandaged the deep wounds in his breast.

With tender care they lifted the still unconscious Phrygian upon a bundle of soft clothes which they had laid upon the mule. Linus, though the task was not without peril, agreed to tend and give him shelter for that night.

Then Junia fled back through the deserted streets. Nereus had begun to be anxious at her long delay, and listened to her story with a grave face. He had never liked Onesimus, and the youth's many sins and errors might well have shaken his confidence. But he and Junia had read not long before the letter which Paul of Tarsus had written to their brother-Christians in Corinth; and, if he wavered for a moment, he was decided in the cause of mercy by Junia's whispered words, 'Love suffereth long and is kind; love thinketh no evil; beareth all things; believeth all things; endureth all things; hopeth all things.'

It was agreed that after dark next evening Nereus should remove the dreadfully wounded sufferer from the house of Linus. Pudens, to whom he told the whole story, arranged, with Claudia's full consent, that Onesimus, as a former member of the household, should be concealed and tended in the hut of one of their country slaves who had charge of a little farm not far from Aricia. This peasant was a Christian, and he carried out the injunctions of his master with faithful kindness.

For many weeks Onesimus hung between life and death; at last, slowly, very slowly, he began to recover. Youth and the natural strength of his constitution, aided by the fresh air of the country, the pure milk, the quiet, the simple wholesome food, and the fact that there was nothing to thwart the recuperative forces of nature, won the day in the battle, and once more Death released the victim whom he seemed to hold securely in his grasp.

CHAPTER XLI

THE KING OF THE GROVE

'Vallis Aricinæ sylva præcinctus opaca
Est lacus, antiqua religione sacer.'
OVID, *Fast.* iii. 263.

WHEN Onesimus recovered full consciousness he did not recognise his unfamiliar surroundings, and was too weak to piece together the broken threads of his memory. Gradually he recalled the incidents of the past. He remembered the gladiators' school, the fight in the amphitheatre, the death of Glanydon, the recoil of feeling which prevented him from killing the Samnite Kalendio, even the sensation which he felt when the sword-thrust pierced his ribs. All the rest was darkness. Where was he? How had he been rescued from the spoliarium? How had he escaped the finishing blow of the confector?

Old Dromo, the vineyard-keeper, was very reticent, for he did not wish to endanger any of those who had taken part in the youth's deliverance. But the quick intelligence of Onesimus, working upon broken hints conjectured that Nereus and Junia, as members of his old *familia*, must have had some share in saving his life. Pudens, when he visited his vineyard to receive his accounts, came and saw him, and spoke a few kindly words; but the youth could see that the centurion had lost his old regard for him. He saw no one else, except occasionally one of the peasant neighbours. Junia, of course, came not. Such a visit would have been impossible to her maiden modesty. What could she do but silently combat a love which she felt to be hopeless? How could she ever marry a gladiator with such a past, and with so hopeless a probable future — a renegade, to all appearance, from the faith of Christ? She could but pray for him, and then strive to prevent her thoughts from turning to him any more. And Nereus came not to see him. He distrusted him, as he thought

of all the crimes through which he must have fallen, from the position of a Christian brother, into such a sink of degradation as a gladiators' school.

Lonely, disgraced, abandoned, in deadly peril of his life from a hundred sources if once he should be recognised, prostrated by weakness, often suffering torments from the pain of wounds which as yet were but half healed, Onesimus sank deeper and deeper into despair. Repentance and the love of God may often grow in the midst of adversity, like some Alpine gentian amid the snows; but sometimes there is a deadliness in the chill of hopeless misfortune which kills every green leaf of faith. The youth, smitten by so many calamities, began to feel as though the river of his life, which might have been so full and rejoicing, had lost itself in mud and sand. His sun had gone down while it yet was day. What was he to do? How could he live? Why had they saved him? If Nereus and Junia and Pudens had done it, by what means he knew not, it was a cruel kindness. Why should they have preserved him to a destiny so miserable? Junia must despise him now: why should she have wished that his life should be spared?

He murmured against God in his heart. He cursed the day of his birth. He had had many chances and recklessly flung away one after another. Sometimes he thought of Christ and of all that he had heard from the lips of Paul in Ephesus about the Friend of publicans and sinners. But had he not denied the faith? Had he not lived like an apostate? If Christ could still love him, why was he left in all this misery and hopelessness? Why did no ray of light gleam through his darkened sky?

And thus he made his heart like the clay which the fire does but harden, not like the gold which it melts. But, notwithstanding his despair, he grew stronger. In two or three months his wounds healed, and he was free to leave his couch of hay and beechen leaves and to wander about the exquisite scenery of his temporary home. Aricia was built in a valley, the crater of an extinct volcano, at the foot of the Alban Mount. Below it the Lacus Nemorensis, 'the Mirror of Diana,' lay gleaming like a transparent emerald, while the steep lava slopes which descended to its level were rich with vineyards and groves and flowers.

But he seldom ventured out in the broad daylight. Aricia lay on the Appian road, only sixteen miles from Rome, and its hill was the haunt of a throng of clamorous beggars, who assailed with their importunity every vehicle that passed along that 'queen of ways.' Hundreds were familiar with the features of Onesimus, and, though their beauty was now impaired by pallor and emaciation, he might again be recognised, with fatal consequences. He only went out after sunset, and by the unfrequented paths which led him towards the grove of Diana and the Nemorensian lake. The lower slopes of the Alban Mount were so overshadowed with dense foliage that, among the woods, he could easily escape observation and indulge without disturbance in his melancholy thoughts.

One day, as he sat under a huge chestnut-tree, he heard the pipe of a shepherd lad driving home his herd of goats from the upland pastures; and, as the hut of the boy's parents adjoined the lodge of Pudens' vineyard, he recognised him as an acquaintance whose name was Ofellus. But instead of coming up to talk with him, as usual, the boy gave a low whistle and beckoned. Onesimus thought that Ofellus only wanted to play a game at *mora* after he had herded his goats, but the boy laid a finger on his lip, and made signs to him to be on his guard until they had got some distance from the place where he was sitting.

'What is the matter?' whispered the Phrygian, in alarm. 'Is any one pursuing me?'

'No,' answered Ofellus, 'but if the king sees you he will think you mean mischief.'

'The king! What king?'

'Don't you know?' said the boy. 'Come and help me to drive in my goats, and I will tell you.'

When they were well out of the grove, and the goats, with their frisking kids, which gave Ofellus so much trouble, were safe in their pen, the boy said: 'We may speak aloud now; but don't you really know who the king is?'

'I did not know that Romans had had a king since Tarquin the Proud,' said Onesimus, laughing; 'unless you mean some Jewish or Eastern Alabarch, like Herod or Izates.'

'No, no,' said Ofellus, 'but the priest of yon temple has been called for ages "the King of the Grove."'

'Why?'

'I don't know why, except that there are some sacrifices which only a king can offer; so they have to call him king, just as they call one of the priests at Rome "the King of the Sacred Rites."'

'Well, but why were you in such terror of this so-called king?'

Again the boy lifted up his hands in astonishment, with the question, 'Don't you know?'

Onesimus explained that he was an Asiatic, and did not know much about the neighbourhood of Rome. Ofellus therefore garrulously poured out the legend of the place. 'There was once some Greek or other,' he said, 'named Hippolytus, who had vowed to live a virgin life for Diana. He was killed by the jealousy of his father, who got Neptune to frighten his chariot horses with a sea monster. So the poor youth was flung out of his chariot, and dragged to death. Then Diana brought him here, and raised him to life again, and called him Virbius, and he was her priest. But, because he was raised to life, every priest has to murder his predecessor before he can be priest himself.'

'And may any one kill the priest who can?'

'Yes, but first they've to pluck the golden bough.'

'The golden bough?'

'Yes. It is not really golden, you know; it is that yellow-white plant, which grows on an old oak in the wood.'

'Mistletoe?' said Onesimus.

'Yes. If a man wants to be king he has to pluck it, and then fight or murder the present king. If he fails he is killed; if he wins he kills the king, and becomes king in his place.'

'Is the king often killed?'

'Very often. Some runaway slave is sure to kill him, and so escape the cross or the branding-iron. Hardly a year passes that he is not attacked. My father says that, before I was born, one king, who was very strong and fierce, was priest for a good many years; and then the Emperor Caligula, out of sheer mad malice, sent a strong young slave on purpose to kill him.'

'But what harm would the king have done to us?'

'None to a boy like me, nor to one who is free-born; but —

'You take me for a runaway slave?' asked Onesimus.

Ofellus nodded his head, and added, 'I saw the king among the trees.' And then he quoted an old Roman song about —

'The dim lake that sleeps
Beneath Aricia's trees;
The trees in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign:
The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain.'

Onesimus, too, had seen the Priest of Diana; but, as he was some distance off, had not observed him closely. Now, however, the goat-boy's words seized his attention. Whoever succeeded in killing the Nemorensian King was secure from the consequences of all past misdeeds, and had ample maintenance and a fine spacious temple to live in. Wandering down the rocky bed of the stream sacred to Egeria, Onesimus had seen the shrine, and had wondered why the trees around it were hung with so many gay woollen streamers, and so many votive tablets; and why women came to it from Rome with garlands on their heads and torches in their hands; and why they treated the priest with so much reverence.

Surely the man's life was a ghastly one, with a murder on his conscience and a murderer on his track! Yet a terrible purpose gradually fixed itself in the mind of Onesimus. He persuaded himself that he was utterly God-forsaken; that such a deluge of calamities could not otherwise have come upon him. Every hope of his life was frustrated; for him there seemed no future possibility of honesty, or happiness, or home, and his heart was burdened with the sore weight of a hopeless love. Why should he not become the King of the Arician Grove? '*The king is always a runaway slave.*' Those words of Ofellus rang in his ear. He was regaining strength. He was swift of foot. His gladiatorial training had taught him how to wield a sword. If Christ had forsaken him, why should not he forsake Christ? What mattered it that he would soon be murdered in his turn? For a few years, at any rate, he might keep his life, and be in honour, and share in gay festivals. He resolved to watch for his opportunity, and to try his chance.

Full of his desperate purpose, he stole under the dark

shadows of the trees, with no guide but the straggling starlight, to find the great oak which Ofellus had described to him. It grew deep in the green hollow close beside the lake, and the hoary mistletoe tufted its upper branches. He climbed the tree, plucked 'the golden bough,' and waited for the rising of the moon to attack the Arician priest if he came out of the temple, as he usually did, before he went to rest.

It was not long before the moon began to silver the dense foliage of the grove, and then he heard a wicket open, and from the place where he knelt crouched among the brushwood he saw the tall figure of the priest, whose shadow fell across the sward and almost reached his hiding-place. He was a gaunt-looking man, but of powerful frame. He carried a large sword in his hand and looked round him suspiciously on every side.[1] In his excitement Onesimus moved, and a fallen branch snapped under his foot. The priest looked round with a startled glance, and Onesimus could see his features working in the moonlight. He had armed himself for his frightful purpose with the only weapon he could find — a reaping-hook, which he took down from Dromo's wall. Listening intently, the priest walked along the grassy path, but as no other sound followed he seemed to relax his vigilance and turned back. Then, with a sudden shout, Onesimus sprang upon him.

But habitual terror had made the priest an adept at self-defence. It was impossible to take him wholly off his guard. At the first sound he turned, quick as lightning, and, dropping his sword, seized with one arm the hand which grasped the reaping-hook — the gleam of which he had caught in the moonlight — and with the other dealt Onesimus a blow on the face which knocked him stunned upon the turf. To stoop over his prostrate form and wrench from his grasp the reaping-hook, was the work of a moment. With a scornful laugh he flung the weapon over the wall which enclosed the sacred shrine, and then placed his foot on the youth's breast.

Onesimus came to his senses, felt the heavy foot on his breast, and opened his eyes.

'So,' said the priest, with a grim laugh, 'you wanted to be Rex Nemorensis, did you? It's none so enviable a post, let

[1] Note 39. — The King of the Grove.

me tell you; and it will take a stronger and craftier man than you to kill Croto when his day comes.'

'Kill me at once,' said the Phrygian, with a groan.

Croto stooped to pick up his sword, and placed its point at the throat of his assailant; but he paused. 'By Hercules,' he said — 'or perhaps officially I ought to say by Virbius — I have seen this face before!'

Onesimus looked up at him, and dimly recalled the slave-prison at Antium.

'Do you know me?' asked the priest.

'I once gave an *aureus* to a man named Croto to let me escape from a slave-prison. You are like him.'

'I am Croto,' said the priest, again laughing grimly. 'Is that how you repay your benefactor? Do you know that it is through you I am here, and am never sure any day of not being murdered before evening? Some sneaking slave betrayed that I had let you escape from Antium. I was threatened with chains and torture. I had seen enough of that sort of thing, so I fled. I thought of Aricia; plucked the golden bough, as I see you have done; and killed Manius, my predecessor.'

'I did not know,' answered Onesimus. 'Kill me. I ask nothing better.'

But Croto still did not drive home the sword. 'Poor wretch!' he said. 'You are but a youth, and are you tired of life already?'

'Utterly tired, or I should not have been the wicked fool I have shown myself to-night.'

'Why should I kill thee?' said Croto. 'Swear never again to attack me, and thou shalt go unscathed.'

'It would be kinder to kill a wretch whom God hates.'

'Go,' said Croto. 'Diana has so many victims, she can spare this one. Give me your "golden bough," and let us part good friends.'

Onesimus rose, miserable and crestfallen. 'I am penniless,' he said, 'or I would try to show myself grateful.'

'Tush!' answered Croto. 'I am King of the Grove and priest of Diana and of Virbius — whoever Virbius was,' he added under his breath. 'The women give me so many offerings that, but for the never knowing where or when the sword will smite, I should be as fat as a Salian, and I feed nearly as

well. Nay, poor lad, I can well do something for thee and never feel the loss. I have more money than I know what to do with, for I can never leave the grove. Take some. I dare say you will need it.'

He forced into the youth's hands a leather bag, full of silver coins, and turned away. Onesimus stood abashed in the moonlight. Then he burst into tears. He had found pity and magnanimity in the heart of the doomed and murderous fugitive! Was there no hope for such a man? Shall any germ of good in man's soul perish unperfected? Shall generosity and forgiveness pass without their reward? The unexpected mercy extended to him by the grim priest of Virbius, in that dark wood of Nemi, brought a blessing to Onesimus, and as he went back to Dromo's hut, the whole scene — the lake, the white mist, the moonlit-silvered foliage, the twinkling of the stars, the song of the nightingale, the silence of the hills — fell with a healing touch on the anguish of his heart.

CHAPTER XLII

A MASSACRE OF SLAVES

'Frigidus a rostris manat per compita rumor.'
HOR. *Sat.* II. vi. 50.

'Servos in numero hominum esse non pateris?'— SEN. *Ep.* xlvii., ap Macrob. *Sat.* i. 11.

ROME was in a state of wild excitement. The city had hardly been more agitated when the news of Caligula's murder had spread among the citizens. The assassination of an emperor was always a possible event. The little human divinity was certain to make so many enemies, and was envied by so many powerful rivals, that the fate of Cæsar after Cæsar made it no more than a nine days' wonder if another fell. But the victim this time was not a Cæsar. It was one of the chief men in the city, a man of consular rank — no less a person than the Præfect of the city, Pedanius Secundus.

And the dread news was whispered from mouth to mouth that he had been murdered by one of his own slaves!

The people in the Forum and the Velabrum and the Subura and at Libo's Well, and the merchants at the Janus, and the patricians in their palaces, and the priests in the temples, and the boys of Rome as they played on the steps of the Julian Basilica, were all discussing this sinister event.

Tigellinus and Petronius, and a group of courtiers, were standing together under the porch of the Temple of Castor when the news reached them. They eagerly questioned the messenger.

'Is it certain that the murderer was a slave?' asked Tigellinus in tones of horror.

'He was caught red-handed,' said the messenger. 'The dagger was wrenched from him, dripping with blood. His name is Vibius and he does not deny the crime.'

'And what was his motive?'

'Some say that the Præfect had promised him his liberty for a certain sum of money. The slave pinched himself for years to raise it, and when he brought the money Pedanius broke his bargain.'

The hearers only shrugged their shoulders.

'That happens commonly enough,' said Cæcina Tuscus, Nero's foster-brother, who had himself been born a slave.

'It only meant,' said Senecio, 'that the Præfect had changed his mind.'

'Others say,' continued the man, 'that Pedanius had a favourite, who had been also a favourite of Vibius, who was driven wildly jealous.'

'The notion of a slave presuming to have a favourite!' lisped the effeminate Quintianus. 'What next?'

'How many slaves had Pedanius?' asked Petronius.

'Four hundred.'

'Is that all?' said Tigellinus. 'It is lucky that he had no more. They will be executed, every one of them — that's one comfort. Let us thank the gods for the Silanian law.'

They saw Seneca approaching them; and it was evident that he had heard the news, for his face wore a look of sorrow and alarm.

'How say you, Seneca?' asked Lucan; 'is the Silanian law to be carried out, and are all Pedanius's four hundred slaves to die?'

'I should hope not,' said the philosopher, indignantly. 'What! are we to butcher this multitude, of whom three hundred and ninety-nine are probably innocent? The Silanian law is fit for barbarians. Every good feeling within us abhors the cruel wrong of murdering young and old, innocent and guilty, in one promiscuous massacre.'

'But that the Præfect of Rome should be murdered by one of his own slaves!' murmured his hearers.

'By one of his own slaves — but maddened, report says, by an intolerable wrong.'

'Wrong?' answered Vestinus, in surprise. 'Are not, then, our slaves our chattels? Has a slave rights?'

'He has the rights of a human being,' answered Seneca. 'Are not our slaves of the same flesh and blood as we? Has not a slave feelings? Has not a slave passions?'

'Yes; very bad passions,' said young Vedius Pollio.

'Do they stand alone in that respect?' asked Seneca, fixing a keen look on him. 'Do masters never show bad passions?'

Every one understood the allusion, for in the days of Augustus the young man's ancestor, Vedius Pollio, had ordered a slave to be flung into the fish-pond to feed the lampreys, merely because he fell and broke a crystal vase. Augustus, who was dining with Pollio that day, was so indignant that he ordered the slave to be set free, and every crystal vase in the house to be broken.

'Seneca will begin to think himself mistaken if I say that *I* agree with him,' said Petronius. 'Nevertheless, I do. I cannot bear to enter a friend's house and hear it clanking with chains and ringing with yells, like an ergastulum.'

'Petronius is the soul of good nature,' said Cassius Longinus; 'but I pity Rome if those maudlin views prevail.'

'Yes,' echoed the fierce Cingonius Varro; 'so many slaves so many foes. We nobles live all our lives in a sort of beleaguered garrison. If the Senate does not do its duty, I shall emigrate.'

'Who makes our slaves our foes?' answered Seneca. 'Mine are not. Most of them are faithful to me. They are my humble friends. I believe they love me. I know that many of them would die for me. We become slaves ourselves because we have so many.'

'Tush!' said Scævinus. 'These sentimentalities will ruin us. Why, some of us have a thousand slaves, and some of us have more. We don't know their names, and have to keep a nomenclator to tell us. Galba is the only person I know who keeps up the ridiculous old fashion of all the slaves and freedmen coming in twice daily, to say "Good morning" and "Good evening." Are we to waste our time in trying to curry favour with them? I *rule* mine by the lash and the chain and the torture. Ha! Pudens, my grave newly-wedded primipilar; here will be some work for you.'

'Never!' said Pudens. 'I would rather resign my commission than carry out the Silanian law and superintend the slaughter of the innocent.'

'And you, my young Titus?' asked Petronius. 'I hear you are going soon to see some military service. Do you think that your step-mother Cænis and the boy Domitian will be able to keep your slaves in order?'

'We have but few, Petronius,' said Titus; 'but they love us. When I was ill, all the *familia* were as tender in their attentions as if they had been brothers.'

'Like to like,' whispered Tigellinus. 'He is half of slave-origin himself.'

'And what may *your* origin be?' asked Vestinus, to whom the remark had been made, and who loathed Tigellinus.

The rumour had spread that all the slaves of Pedanius were to be executed, and the attitude of the people grew very threatening. Many of them had been slaves themselves, and many of them lived in intimacy with the slave population, which immensely outnumbered the freedmen. Familiar with the insolence and the exactions of the wealthy, they assembled in throngs and demanded that there should be a trial, and that the innocent should be spared. Their language became so menacing that the Senate was hastily convened. It was hoped by all the more just and kind of the senators that mild counsels would prevail, and the Silanian decree be repealed or modified. They pointed out that the extreme rarity of the crime showed that the peril was not great; that, in this particular instance, Pedanius, besides being a merciless master, had provoked his own fate; that there was not a tittle of evidence to prove the complicity of the *familia* in this deed of isolated vengeance; that it would be monstrous to kill innocent boys and girls, and faithful men and women, for one madman's crime. But the Senate was carried away partly by the selfish fears of many of its members, and partly by the impassioned speech of Cassius Longinus. An eminent jurist, a conservative who considered the traditions of the past incomparably superior to the wisdom of the present, a man of great wealth, high rank, and a certain Roman integrity, he rose in his place, and threw the weight of his influence into the scale of the old pagan ruthlessness.

'Often have I been present, Conscript Fathers,' he said, 'at meetings of the Senate in which I have only protested by my silence against the innovations which are almost invariably for the worse. I did not wish you to think that I was unduly biassed by my personal studies, nor did I wish to weaken such weight as I may possess by too frequent and fruitless interpositions. But to-day the commonwealth demands my undivided efforts. A consular of

Rome has been murdered in his own house by a slave's treachery, and an unrepealed decree of the Senate threatens punishment to the whole family of slaves who neither prevented nor revealed the plot. Decree impunity for them, that when the chief magistracy of the city has been no protection we may each of us, forsooth, be defended by our own dignity! Who can be protected by any number of slaves, if four hundred were not enough to protect Pedanius Secundus? If fear did not suffice to make his slaves vigilant, which of us will be safe? There are some who do not blush to pretend,' he continued, darting an angry glance at Seneca, 'that the murderer did but avenge his own wrongs! Let us, then, pronounce at once that Pedanius was justly murdered! Are we to argue a case which our wiser ancestors have already decided? Why, even if the decision had now to be made for the first time, do you imagine that a slave would have had the daring to murder his master without one threat, without one rash murmur about his design? He concealed his plan, forsooth; he prepared his dagger, and no one knew of it! Could he, then, with equal facility pass through the slaves who were on night-watch, unfasten the doors of the bedchamber, carry in a light, perpetrate the bloody deed, without one person being aware of it? Guilt betrays itself beforehand in many ways. If slaves reveal to us our peril, we can live, though we be single among multitudes, safe among those who tremble for themselves — at the worst not unavenged among the guilty. Our ancestors looked with suspicion on the character of slaves, even when the slaves, born on their estates or in their houses, had learnt from infancy to love their master. But in these days we count *nations* among our households. Their rites are different; their religions are foreign or *nil*. We cannot keep in order this sink and scum of humanity except by fear. But, you say, "some of the innocent will perish among them." Be it so! Are no brave soldiers beaten to death with rods when a routed army is punished by decimation? No great example can be inflicted without some unfairness, but the public advantage outweighs the individual injustice; and in any case, if four hundred slaves do perish, it will be a cheap loss.'

There was more than one senator who burned to refute

the glittering sophisms and cruel hardness of the jurist's speech; but Pætus Thrasea was absent, as he often was, and Seneca was cowed by his habitual timidity. He felt how easily he could have torn the speech of Longinus into shreds, and with what genuine lightnings of indignant conviction he could have shattered its pedantries and its inhumanity. But he had not the nerve to confront the impulses of a selfish panic. He longed to plead the cause of mercy and of justice, as he was so well capable of doing, and had the murmurs of dissent which the speech of Cassius evoked been but a little louder he might have plucked up courage and have saved the Senate from a deed of blood. But it was whispered on all sides that Nero leaned to severity, and Seneca's heart failed him once more. The murmurs died away; and Cingonius Varro, emboldened by the devilish plea of necessity, rose to propose further that not only the slaves of Pedanius should be killed, but all the freedmen who lived under his roof be banished. Nero, however, made known that, while he did not wish the ancient severity to be mitigated, neither did he wish it to be increased, and the proposal dropped without a seconder.

But let us notice in passing that retribution followed cruelty. The merciless met with no mercy themselves. Cassius, who meanwhile had become blind, was not long afterwards banished by Nero to unwholesome Sardinia. Varro, a little later, was put to death by Galba just after he had become Consul elect. Many who thus voted for the murder of the innocent were murdered though innocent themselves.

The Senate might decree, but the people were indignant even to fury. Those who knew one or other of these poor slaves, and knew their innocence of what had been an act of sudden fury on the part of Vibius, did their utmost to raise a tumult. Hermas, the slave of Pedanius, whom Onesimus had seen in the Antian ergastulum, was known to all the Christians as one of their brethren; and though their principles forbade them to resist the decree of the state by violence, their lamentations and appeals that some pity should be extended to the victims stirred the hearts of the multitude. And they knew that many senators and Prætorians were in their favour. At one time an attempt at rescue seemed probable. A crowd armed with stones and

torches gathered in front of the house of Pedanius, where the four hundred slaves were now in chains under a guard of soldiers. But they were terrified by the blind deification of the imperial authority, and a mixed and cowardly mob found no leader to inspirit them to attack the house.

Titus was deeply moved and excited, and he went to his old friend Pudens to see if anything could be done. Pudens was dreading lest he should be appointed to see the execution carried out. When Claudia, hanging on his shoulder and looking into his manly face with her innocent blue eyes, entreated him to fear God rather than man, he assured her with a kiss and a smile, that at all costs, even at the cost of martyrdom, he would refuse. But Nereus had told him about poor Hermas, and the sweet and engaging character of that young man was so well known in the Christian community, that Pudens would have been ready if possible to provide for his escape.

'I wish,' said Titus, 'that Onesimus had not been killed as he is said to have been at the last gladiatorial show. There is a rumour that, after all, he escaped with his life, but if so he has disappeared, poor fellow, no one knows where. He helped us when Britannicus was in danger. He might help us now.'

The centurion shook his head. He knew nothing of the attack on the King of the Grove, and supposed that Onesimus was still with Dromo at Aricia, but he thought it safest to say nothing about him even to Titus.

They could think of no step to take; but Nereus, who, as a confidential freedman, had been present, heard the hint, and he determined to act upon it on his own responsibility. He knew that Onesimus was not available, but he knew a young Christian slave-boy named Protasius in the house of Pudens who had been acquainted with some of the home-born slaves of Pedanius, and was thus familar with the slaves' cells in his house. There was no time to lose. The massacre was to be carried out the next day. Nereus went to the boy, who said that he knew of a little neglected window half hidden by thick bushes in the peristyle, and if he could only get there he could make his way to the cell of Hermas. The night would be dark and moonless, yet the risk would be terrific, the chance almost hopeless. But the

Christians were taught not to hold their lives dear unto themselves, and they considered that martyrdom in the cause of duty was the most glorious of crowns. Further than this, they always acted together, as a faithful, secret, well-organized body. With the connivance of the Prætorian Vitalis, who was a Christian, Nereus found means to get the boy introduced into the house, and, creeping along in the darkness, he found Hermas tied with cords in his cell. He had taken a knife with him, the rope was quickly severed, and both he and Hermas, knowing every intricacy of the house and grounds, got away in safety with an ease which they attributed to the special interposition of Heaven in their behalf. What were those glimmering lights which seemed to flash and fade in the dim silence as they stole through the peristyle? Was not some white angel of God helping to deliver them, as angels had stood by the three youths in the furnace, and had liberated Peter and John from prison? The belief aided them, for it gave them a confidence which was ready for any emergency, and contributed in no small measure to the unheard-of facility of their escape.

Nereus had confided to Junia his secret attempt to save Hermas, and she pleaded that something should be done at the same time to save the hapless Syra, who in the mean time had been married to Phlegon. But this proved to be impossible. All the women slaves were shut up in the triclinium together, and the door was carefully guarded. Syra remained among the doomed. Phlegon was still technically the slave of Pedanius, but as he was not in the household he had been passed over. This was poor Syra's only comfort, and it was taken from her. Phlegon left his duties at the spoliarium, and behaved so menacingly in the mob that he was seized and, on the evidence of a freedman, included in those set apart for execution.

Meanwhile, after the humiliating adventure in the grove of Diana, Onesimus was unwilling to linger at Aricia. With no plan, but in the restlessness of despair, he disguised himself as well as he could, and by unfrequented paths slunk back to Rome, not knowing and not caring what might befall him there. He slept under the vestibule of the Temple of Mars, and next morning, mingling with the crowd that surged

through the streets, he heard that the dreadful sentence against the slaves of Pedanius was to be carried into immediate execution. All thoughts of a rescue had been abandoned, for Nero had published a notice that any interference with the sentence would be treated with the extremest penalty. The clang of soldiers' armour was heard on every side, and Prætorians lined the entire distance between the house of Pedanius and the remote part of the Esquiline, where the slaves were to be killed. The poor victims, tied together by fours, were led out of the house. Eagerly Onesimus scanned their faces, and was glad that he did not see the face of Hermas among them.

A little delay occurred when the soldiers on guard discovered that Hermas had escaped, but as they themselves ran serious peril of being punished for carelessness in the matter, they prudently held their tongues.

When the procession began to move, the wail which rose from the doomed victims was taken up by the multitude, and they abandoned themselves to their emotions with all the passion of a Southern people. They wept and wrung their hands, and raised their arms to heaven, as though to appeal for vengeance. But the Prætorians surrounded the slaves with drawn swords, and armed gladiators, who lined the streets, sternly thrust back the surging mob. A ghastly sense of fascination drew Onesimus to the scene of execution. There was no time to be particular as to the mode of death. The soldiers, dreading a riot, were chiefly anxious to get through their odious task as quickly as possible. One after another, amid groans and shrieks, and pools of blood, old grey-haired men and women, and young boys and little children and fair girls, had the sword driven into their throats or through their hearts. The agony of the boys was pitiable to witness. Some of them had belonged to the order of slaves who were chosen for their beauty, were dressed in rich robes, and pampered with every form of luxury and indulgence. Their mode of life had left no courage in them, and death meant to them the end of all things, or some tormenting Tartarus. But in vain they wept, in vain they pleaded for mercy.

On the other hand, the high bearing of some of the slaves moved a deeper pity than the fate of these victims of luxury

and cruelty. For some of the Christians in the household of Pedanius, who had not been so fortunate as Hermas, knew that their brethren were looking on with prayer and sympathy, and went to their fate, not only with Stoic dignity, but with beautiful humility and simple peace. They felt something of the glory of martyrdom. A light shone in their upturned faces, and there was an accent as of music in their murmured prayers. There were a few of their heathen fellow-sufferers who bared their breasts to the sword with stolid indifference, and even with unseemly levity; but the Christians went to death as to a coronation. One poor boy — his name was Verus — moved many to tears. When first he heard the groans of those who fell as the sword smote them, he shrank back and trembled, for he was little more than a child. His father had become a convert of Linus, and he had caused his children to be baptised in infancy, and this was his favourite son. Even in that evil slave-household the boy had grown up unstained, like some white lily whose roots are in the mud. When Verus saw the sword driven into his father's heart, he sprang back with a cry, and in his excitement grasped the hand of one of the legionaries. The brutal executioner flung him back so violently that he fell. Instantly regaining his composure, he rose to his knees, clasped his hands, and turning his eyes heavenwards, began to pray — 'Our Father, which art in heaven.' At that moment the sun shone forth out of dark clouds, and as the light streamed over him, and made a natural aureole round his bright hair, they saw his face as it had been the face of an angel. Even the soldier who had raised his hand to strike stood amazed, and delayed his blow. But with a jeer the ruffian who had flung him back, brought down his sword on the boy's head. He fell without a word, and the blood streamed over the bright face, and bedabbled the fair hair. As for Syra and Phlegon, they stood hand in hand in mute despair, and perished together, having known no consolation in life but their pure love for each other, and appalled by the mystery which crowned lives so miserable as theirs had been with a death so cruel and undeserved.

In vain the agonised spectators cursed the soldiers, cursed the dead Pedanius, cursed the Senate, and in their madness did not even refrain from cursing Nero. Before an hour was

over the deed was done. The yet warm bodies, the yet palpitating limbs, of these three hundred and ninety-eight victims, were flung into one of the deep pits of the Esquiline, and a cartload of sawdust soaked up the bloody traces of that slaughter of the innocent.

Sickened, dazed, horrified, Onesimus left the dreadful scene, and went back to the Forum, where he sat half-stunned, on the steps of the great Julian Basilica. The life of Rome was going on as though nothing had happened. Peasants were selling chestnuts and olives and macerated chickpeas to the crowd. Idlers were sauntering up and down, occasionally stopping to listen to the lampoons of a bawling poetaster, or to watch the tame vipers of a snake-charmer. Others, who could not stand poets reciting in the dog-days, were devoting their attention to the performances of a learned pig.[1] The vestal Rubria passed by in all the pride of her stola, and tasselled pallium, and jewelled necklace, amid the deep reverence of the people, and unconscious of the coming doom which Nero's vileness had soon in store for her. Boys were playing at draughts on the circles which they had cut in the marble pavement, where they may still be seen. The swallows twittered and chased each other about under the blue sky; but nothing could charm away the gloom of the Phrygian's heart, and with his head bent over both palms he sat, the picture of despair.

A touch on the shoulder, the whisper of his name, made him spring to his feet in alarm; but looking round he saw the bright, honest face of Titus smiling down on him.

'How did you recognise me?' he asked.

'A disguise does not often deceive me,' said Titus; 'but I recognised you by your figure and attitude. I won't betray you. Come here, behind the shrine of Vesta, and tell me about yourself.'

'How wretched and ill you look!' he said, as they stood alone under the shadow of the little circular temple and the House of the Vestals. 'Where have you been this long time? What has happened to you? Why are you here? I was mentioning you to Pudens only this morning, and if we had known that you were in Rome you might have been of use.'

[1] Petron. *Sat.* 47; Juv. *Sat.* iii. 9.

'You once helped to save my life,' said Onesimus, 'when I did not deserve it. I will tell you all.'

He gave an outline of what had befallen him, concealing only the shameful attack on the Rex at Aricia.

'And what will you do now?' asked Titus.

'Starve — beg — die!' he answered, in deep dejection.

'Listen,' said Titus. 'I have just heard from Pudens that he is likely to be sent to a command in Britain, and I shall go with him. Claudia will accompany him, and the old British king, Caractacus. I think that when you left Aricia you might have come to Pudens and shown yourself more grateful for his kindness. But the centurion is very good and forgiving, and, if I ask him, I am sure that he will let you go with us to Britain.'

Onesimus longed to accept the offer, but he thought of Junia. He was near her now.

'Is Nereus to go?' he asked.

'No,' said Titus. 'Nereus is a freedman now, and he is too old for so distant a voyage and so hard a service.'

Then Onesimus confessed his love for Junia, and the wild hope which he still entertained that he might some day be accepted by her. Humbly he took the hand of Titus and kissed it, and said —

'Forgive me; I will struggle on as best I may.'

'Nay,' said Titus; 'I have not forgotten what you once did for me and Britannicus, though in that matter, too, you fell short afterwards. I never forget Britannicus,' he added, sadly, and stood for a moment silent. 'Listen,' he said. 'I know two people in Rome, besides Pudens, who are good and kind. One is my uncle, Flavius Sabinus; the other is Pomponia Græcina. I am sure that one of them would find some place for you. Acte has asked about you more than once, and was, I know, fond of you. But it would not be safe for you to enter Nero's Palace again.'

'Then let me serve the lady Pomponia, if I may.'

'Follow me,' said Titus; 'I will see what I can do for you.'

Their way led towards the Capenian Gate, where the Appian Road enters the city. They had not proceeded far when they met a procession of humble people thronging round a band of soldiers, who were entering Rome in charge of several prisoners.

CHAPTER XLIII

A NOTABLE PRISONER

'He that hath light within his own clear breast,
May sit i' the centre, and enjoy bright day;
But he that hath a dark soul, and foul thoughts,
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun;
Himself is his own dungeon.'

MILTON, *Comus.*

A ROMAN centurion, whose armour gleamed in the sun, was walking at the head of the decuria of soldiers, several of whom were attached by a loose coupling chain to the arms of various prisoners. The spectacle was common enough, and in the varied turmoil of the principal thoroughfare, with the stream of travellers which swept to and fro about the capital of the world, there was nothing in it to attract notice. But the interest felt in one of the prisoners had induced a throng of people — mostly foreigners, slaves, and artisans — to go and meet him.

Titus recognised in the centurion an old friend. 'Ha, Julius!' he cried; 'so you have returned from Cæsarea. You will have long stories to tell us about those curious and turbulent Jews. Will you sup with my father to-night? You will be welcome.'

'Yes!' said Julius, 'gladly, for I am tired with a long day's march.'

'You know our frugal ways. You will have to recline on couches made only by Archias, and sup mainly on vegetables off earthenware plates,' said Titus laughing, and quoting Horace.

'It will be a supper of the gods after our fare in the nights and days of storm on the Adramyttian ship off Clauda and Malta,' said Julius. 'But I must hurry on now to hand over my prisoners to the Prætorian Præfect.'

'Who are your prisoners?'

'They are of the ordinary sort except one. He is the strangest, bravest, wisest man I ever met; and yet he is a

fanatical Jew — one of this new sect which the mob calls Christians.'

'Which is he?'

Julius pointed to a prisoner chained to the foremost soldier, on either side of whom nearly all the visitors were grouped, listening eagerly to every word he uttered, and showing him every sign of love and reverence. He was a man with the aquiline nose and features of his race, somewhat bent, somewhat short of stature, evidently from his gestures a man of nervous and emotional temperament. His hair had grown grey in long years of hardship. Many a care and peril and anxiety had driven its ploughshare across his brow. His cheeks were sunken, and the eyes, though bright, were disfigured by ophthalmia. He was evidently short-sighted, but as he turned his fixed and earnest look now on one, now on another of his companions, the expression of his deeply-marked face was so translucent with some divine light within, that those who once saw him felt compelled to look long on a countenance of no ordinary type of nobleness.

Titus gazed at him. Nothing could be more unlike the worn and weary Jew who had been buffeted by so many storms and escaped from so many terrific perils, than was the athletic young Roman, with his short fair hair which curled round a face ruddy in its prime of youth and health. In the prisoner's aspect there was none of the Roman dignity which marked the look and bearing of Pætus Thrasea; none of the manly independence which looked the whole world in the face from the eyes of Cornutus or Musonius Rufus; none certainly of the rich Eastern beauty which marked Aliturus or the Herodian princes. Yet Titus as he watched him was, for a moment, too much astonished to speak.

'He looks all you say of him,' he murmured. 'Who is he?'

'His name is Paulus of Tarsus. He is evidently a great leader among these Christians.'

Hitherto Onesimus, absorbed in his own sad reflections, had neither heeded the throng, nor attended to the conversation between Titus and Julius. But suddenly he caught the name, and looked up with a hasty glance.

He saw before him not a few of the Christian community of Rome. Many of them were known to him. Nereus was

there and Junia; and from the household of Cæsar he recognised Tryphæna and Tryphosa and Herodion; and there were Linus, and Cletus, and the soldiers Urban and Celsus, and Claudia Dicæosyne, wife of a freedman of Narcissus, and Andronicus, and Alexander, and Rufus, sons of Simon of Cyrene who had borne Christ's cross, and many more.

In a single glance he took in the presence of these, and a sense of danger flashed across him, lest any one of them, perhaps a false brother, should penetrate his disguise as Titus had done. But it was not at them that he looked. His whole being was absorbed in the gaze which he fixed on him whom he had always heard spoken of as the Apostle Paulus.

Yes, there he stood; his face thinner and more worn than of old, his hair now almost white with an age which was reckoned less by years than by labours and sorrows; but otherwise just as he was when Philemon had gone from Colossæ and taken with him his boy-slave to listen to the words of impassioned reasoning and burning inspiration which Paul poured forth at Ephesus in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. What a flood of memories surged over the young Phrygian's soul as he saw him! As though his life, since then, had been written in lightning, he thought in one instant of that long tale of shame and sorrow — from the theft at Colossæ to the wanderings with the priests of the Syrian goddess, the gladiators' school, the attempted murder at Aricia. It all flashed upon his recollection, and he felt as if he could sink to the earth for shame. His first impulse was to spring forward and cast himself at the Apostle's feet. But he heard Julius say that they had halted too long, and that he must press forward with his charge. The word 'Forward, soldiers!' was given, and Onesimus hid himself behind a tomb, only rejoining Titus when the Christians had passed by. Titus seemed lost in thought, but as they were near Pomponia's house, he said:

'Onesimus, did you see that prisoner?'

'Yes. And I saw him when I was a boy in Ephesus.'

'I know *men* when I see them,' said Titus. 'He is a man,' and then he repeated the Greek line —

'How gracious a thing is a man, if he be but a man.'[1]

[1] Ὡς χαριέν ἐστ' ἄνθρωπος ἢν ἄνθρωπος ᾖ.

'He is a Jew; he is small and bent; he is ugly; yet somehow his ugliness is more beautiful tenfold than the beauty of Paris or Tigellinus.'

'You should hear him speak!' said Onesimus.

Titus shrugged his shoulders. 'A Christian!' he said; 'a worshipper of a Jew whom they tell me Pilatus crucified! And yet,' he added, 'there is something more in these Christians than I can fathom. Britannicus was very much struck by them, and I believe Pomponia is a Christian. She told me once that "no weapon forged against these Christians prospers." Pilatus, they say, came to a bad end.'

'What happened to him?' asked Onesimus.

'They say he became a haunted man. His wife Claudia Procula turned Christian. He was banished to Helvetia and there committed suicide; and his ghost haunts a bare mountain, and is forever wringing and washing its hands. But I believe it is all nonsense,' said Titus; 'and here we are at Pomponia's house.'

They found the gracious noble lady with her boy by her side in the peristyle tending her flowers among her doves, which were so tame that they would perch on her head and shoulder, and coo softly, as they suffered both her and the young Aulus to smooth their plumage.

> 'Bathed in such hues as when the peacock's neck
> Assumes its brightest tint of amethyst
> Embathed in emerald glory.'

The heart of Pomponia was open to every kind impulse, and as there was little difficulty in finding room for another slave in the ample palace of a Roman noble like Aulus Plautius, Onesimus, saved once more from ruin and destitution, slept that night in the cell of a new master.

Meanwhile Julius and his prisoner had proceeded on their way. Leaving the Circus Maximus on their left, and going along the Vicus Tuscus, amid temples and statues and arches of triumph, they passed the Prætorian Camp, built by Sejanus, near the Nomentan Road, and reached the Excubitorium and the barracks of that section of the Prætorians whose turn it was to keep guard over the person of the Emperor. Here the centurion found Burrus, and in consigning to his charge the prisoner who had appealed unto Cæsar, handed to him

at the same time some letters respecting him from Felix Festus, and King Agrippa. Burrus read them with interest.

'This is a remarkable prisoner,' he said. 'The Jews accuse him of sedition and profanity; but they have sent neither evidence nor witnesses.'

'We passed through a fearful storm off Crete,' said Julius, 'and were shipwrecked at Malta. I hear rumours that another large vessel, which sailed soon after us from Cæsarea, with many Jews on board, foundered at sea. I expect that some of the accusers of Paulus perished with her.'

'Well, if so, his case will be delayed. He is innocent, I suppose?'

'Perfectly innocent, I am certain. Christian as he is, it is such men whom the gods love. We all of us should have perished at sea but for his wisdom and good sense, and if we had listened to his advice we should not have been wrecked at all.'

'Ha!' said Burrus; 'he shall be well treated.' He called to a Prætorian and said: 'The prisoner in the outer room may hire a lodging for himself. He will, of course, be in custody. The men must take their turns to be chained to him; but mark — choose out the kindest and most honest men for the work, and let them understand that I order him to be as gently dealt with as can be, consistently with his security.'

That night the dream of the life of Paul of Tarsus was accomplished; he was sleeping in Rome. He was an ambassador, though an ambassador in bonds.

CHAPTER XLIV

A SUPPER AT VESPASIAN'S

'You 'll have no scandal while you dine,
But honest talk and wholesome wine.'

TENNYSON.

'Arma quidem ultra
Littora Juvernæ promovimus, et modo captas
Orcadas et minima contentos nocte Britannos.
Sed quæ nunc populi fiunt victoris in urbe
Non faciunt illi quos vicimus.'

JUV. *Sat.* ii. 159–163.

THE centurion Julius was genuinely pleased with the invitation of Titus, and duly presented himself at the modest house of Vespasian. The other guests were Aulus Plautius and Pomponia, King Caradoc, Pudens and Claudia, and Seneca, together with several members of the family, and among them Vespasian's brother, Flavius Sabinus, who had just been appointed Præfect of the City, in the place of Pedanius Secundus. The fortunes of the Flavian house were rising rapidly; but Sabinus, an eminent soldier, with his blushing honours fresh upon him, was regarded as the head of the family.

Vespasian was poor, and was also fond of money. That he had not amassed a fortune in his various commands was much to his credit. His house, afterwards occupied by Josephus, was so unpretending as to excite the wonder of those who saw it after he had become Emperor, and his entertainments were usually marked by a more than Sabine simplicity.

On this occasion, however, since a king, a prime minister, and a consular — his old commander — who had enjoyed the honour of sharing an Emperor's triumphs, were among his guests, Vespasian had donned the unwonted splendour of his

'triumphal ornaments,' a flowered tunic, over which flowed a purple robe, embroidered with palm branches in gold and silver thread. He was not half at ease in this splendid apparel, and told his wife Cænis that he was an old fool for his pains. The entertainment was sufficient, though Otho would have thought it hardly good enough for his freedmen. The board was graced with old Sabine and Etruscan ware of great antiquity and curious workmanship, as well as with objects of interest which Vespasian had bought when he was an officer in Thrace, Crete, and Cyrene.

But Vespasian himself, who was sturdily indifferent to fashion, and took pleasure in showing how little he regarded the criticisms of Roman dandyism, drank out of a little silver cup which had belonged to his grandmother, and which he would not have exchanged for the loveliest crystal on the table of Petronius. And Caradoc, as he sat there in his simple dress and golden torque, was far more happy at that modest entertainment than he would have been at the house of any other of the Roman nobles.

The party was, so to speak, a British party, for most of them were familiar with the storm-swept Northern island, which was regarded as the Ultima Thule of civilisation. That day Pudens had received an appointment to go to Britain and support as well as he could the wavering fortunes of Suetonius Paulinus. Caradoc was permitted to return with him and take up his abode at Noviomagus, the town of the Regni. They were to sail as early as possible from Ostia. More than this, Aulus Plautius, to whose powerful influence these appointments had been due, had secured for his young friend Titus the excellent position of a tribune of the soldiers to the army in Britain. It was a graceful recognition of the services which Vespasian had rendered to him twenty years before, when, as his legate of the legion, he had fought thirty battles, captured more than twenty towns, and reduced the Isle of Wight to subjection. It was in Britain, as Tacitus says, that Vespasian had first been '*shown to the Fates*.' The whole party were in the highest spirits. The old king rejoiced to think that he should rest at last in the land of his fathers. Claudia longed to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of Roman luxury. Pudens knew that in Rome his Christian convictions might speedily bring him into peril, and that in far-off Britain he could breathe

a freer and purer air. Vespasian had much to tell of the glories of the country. Lastly, Titus felt all the ardour of a young soldier entering on high command in new and deeply interesting fields of adventure, and in the company of the officer whom he most respected and loved.

It was natural, therefore, that the conversation should turn on Britain, and the tremendous events of which it had recently been the scene. Aulus Plautius had heard from Suetonius Paulinus himself the story how he had carried his soldiers on flat-bottomed boats across the Straits of Mona, while the horses swam behind; how the British women, with dishevelled hair, stood thick upon the shore in dark robes, and, with torches in their hands, ran to and fro among the soldiers like Furies; above all, how the Druids stood there conspicuous, their long white beards streaming to the winds, and, with hands uplifted to heaven, cursed the Romans; and how at last, 'falling on the barbarous and lunatic rout, he had beaten them down, scorched and rolling in their own fires.' But darker news had followed. Roman emissaries — 'and those bad young Romans are the curse of Rome,' said the old commander, looking up from the tablets of Suetonius — had behaved with infamous cruelty to Boadicea, the heroic Queen of the Iceni, and she was burning to revenge her wrongs. Paulinus described her as 'a woman big and tall, of visage grim and stern, harsh of voice, her hair of bright colour flowing down to her hips, who wore a plighted garment of divers colours, and a great golden chain under a large flowing mantle.'

'He has sent me some fierce British verses, King,' said Aulus, turning to Caradoc, 'which one of his literary officers — Laureatus, of the island of Vectis — has translated from British into Latin galliambics, the metre which, he says, most resembles their tumultuous lilt. The translator must be a true poet, for not even the "Atys" of Catullus is more impassioned. I shall be half afraid to read them to you, for they will stir your blood like the sound of a trumpet, and you will fancy yourself charging us again at the head of your Silures.'

'Ah!' said the old warrior, sadly; 'my fires have long sunk into white embers. A king who has been led in fetters through the capital of his enemies can fight no more for a free nation, however intolerably it may have been wronged.'

Claudia pressed her father's hand, and tears shone in her blue eyes.

'Nay, Claudia,' said the king; 'I did not wish to sadden thee. Thou and I have other and brighter hopes than once we had, and it will be like new life to us to tread once more by the broad rivers of Britain, and on her heathy hills. I am an exile and poor. My jewels and trappings were carried before me at the triumph of Claudius and Aulus;—though Cartismandua, who betrayed me, still has her golden corslet and her enamelled chariot. These things are, I know, as the gods decide, and sometimes they suffer wickedness to triumph. But let Aulus Plautius read us the verses.'

Aulus read the galliambics into which the poet of Vectis had translated the British war-song,[1]

'They that scorn the tribes, and call us Britain's barbarous populaces,
Shall I heed them in their anguish? Shall I brook to be supplicated?
Hear, Icenian, Catieuchlanian; hear, Coritanian, Trinobant!
Must their ever-ravening eagle's beak and talon annihilate us?
Bark an answer, Britain's raven! bark and blacken innumerable!
Hear it, gods! The gods have heard it, O Icenian, O Coritanian!
Doubt not ye the gods have answered, Catieuchlanian, Trinobant!
Lo! their precious Roman bantling, lo! the colony Camulodune,
Shall we teach it a Roman lesson? shall we care to be pitiful?
Shout, Icenian, Catieuchlanian; shout, Coritanian, Trinobant!
Bloodily, bloodily fall the battle-axe, unexhausted, inexorable!
Take the hoary Roman head, and shatter it, hold it abominable,
Cut the Roman boy in pieces in his lust and voluptuousness.
Fall the colony, city, and citadel, London, Verulam, Camulodune!'

'Ye gods! What cannot a poet do?' exclaimed Seneca, with enthusiasm. 'Those lines would have made me die in battle, if I had been a Briton.'

'They have caused eighty thousand to die in battle,' said Aulus. 'A later letter of Paulinus tells us that, after a fearful massacre of the Romans at the three colonies of Londinium, Verulamium, and Camulodunum, the Britons assembled two hundred and thirty thousand warriors, with whom he fought a tremendous battle near Verulamium. But how could those woad-painted fighters withstand the skill, the discipline, the heavy armour of our legionaries? We lost but four hundred, Paulinus says; and Boadicea, who, in a chariot with her two daughters, had raged through the battle like an angry lioness, has taken poison in despair.'

[1] The author has the kind permission of the illustrious Laureatus of Vectis to make this use of his lines.

The wild passionate verses had produced strangely different effects on the little audience. The old king started up from his couch, his breast panting, his eyes full of fire, and then sank back again and hid his face in his mantle. For the lines recalled to him his own heroic struggles, and his great father, Cunobalin, and his noble brothers. Claudia mused in silence, thinking of the day when the Prince of Peace should come again — a thought which Pomponia divined as she laid her hand on the fair head of her friend. Vespasian looked grave, and thought it rather treasonous of a Roman poet to turn such verses into Latin. Pudens and Titus felt a pang of regret that, in combat with a free people, the name of Rome should be stained with the infamies of scamps and weaklings who had provoked that terrible revolt.

Seneca little knew that Aulus, in reading extracts from the letter of Suetonius, had suppressed a passage in which the general had indignantly stated as one cause of the insurrection, not only the wrongs of Boadicea, but the fact that Seneca himself had suddenly called in large sums of money which he had lent to the British at usurious interest, and that the demand for repayment had reduced the poor Iceni to bankruptcy and despair.

'We have been talking about Britain all this time,' said Titus; 'but here is our friend Julius straight from Palestine, and he must have plenty of news to tell us about those odd fanatics, the Jews.'

'How goes the world in Jerusalem?' asked Vespasian. 'The question is very interesting to an old soldier like me. We constantly hear of risings there. I am told that affairs are getting desperate, and who knows but what the Emperor may some day despatch me thither at the head of a legion?'

'Nothing is more likely,' said Julius.

'Unless you snore while the Emperor is singing, father, as you did at Subiaco,' said Titus, laughing, as did all the guests.

'Impudent boy!' said Vespasian, joining in the laugh. 'Let Julius go on.'

Julius told them that ever since the days when Pontius Pilatus had half maddened the Jews by bringing the Roman ensigns into Jerusalem, and Caligula had reduced them to

stupefaction by proposing to set up his own image in their Temple, they had been on the verge of sedition.

'Felix,' he added, 'only got off their impeachment by the influence of his brother, Pallas. Festus had hard work with their bandits. At present they are raging in a first-rate quarrel with young King Agrippa.'

He proceeded to tell them how Agrippa, for the delectation of his friends, had built a dining-room at the top of his Palace, so that his guests as they lay at the banquet could enjoy the highly curious spectacle of all that was going on in the Temple precincts. Indignant at this encroachment, the Jews built up a blank wall of such a height as not only to exclude the view from the Asmonæan Palace of Agrippa, but also to shut out the surveillance of the Roman soldiers in the tower Antonia. Agrippa was furious, and Festus ordered them to demolish the wall. But they said that they would die rather than consent to do this. They appealed to Nero, and Festus allowed them to send their High Priest, Ishmael ben Phabi, with nine others, to plead their cause with the Emperor.

'I suspect that this deputation was on board the vessel whose shipwreck I mentioned,' said Julius.

'Will this appeal be successful?' asked Vespasian.

'I believe it will,' answered the centurion; 'for Poppæa is very favourable to the Jews.'

'Shall we really see a Jewish High Priest in Rome?' asked Pomponia.

'Yes, lady,' answered Julius; 'but a very unworthy one. He rules by terror. He robs and defrauds the inferior priests to such an extent that they die of starvation, and his blows have become proverbial. To the disgust of the Jews he wears silk gloves when he is offering sacrifice, in order to keep his hands clean. And yet, so scrupulous are these oddest of people, that they would not let his father perform the very greatest sacrifice in their whole year because of the most insignificant accident.'

'What was it?' asked Pomponia.

'You will really hardly believe it. On the eve of the great festival which they call the *Kippurim* — a sort of day of expiation — the father of this High Priest was talking to Aretas, king of Arabia, and by an accident a speck of the Emir's saliva fell on Ishmael's beard. This made him "unclean," in their

opinion; and a deputy, whom they call the Sagan, had to perform its principal function!'

The guests laughed.

'But tell us now,' said Vespasian, 'about these new Christians. I suppose they, and their Christus, are more turbulent even than the Jews?'

'So we Romans are led to believe,' said Julius. 'It is exactly the reverse. The Christians are the most peaceful of men, and they reverence the Roman power.'

'Have you seen much of them?' asked Aulus.

'I witnessed a remarkable scene,' said Julius, 'just before I left Jerusalem. Festus, as you are aware, died the other day, worn out with cares and worries. Pending the appointment of his successor, Agrippa appointed a new High Priest — Annas, son of the priest before whom Christus was tried. This Annas took upon himself unwonted authority. He summoned the head of the Christians — James, a brother of their Christus — before their Sanhedrin, and ordered him to be stoned to death. But this James was almost worshipped by the people, who called him "the Just." To give him a chance of life, they asked him what he thought of Christus, and he called him a God. On hearing this answer they flung him down from the roof of the Temple. The fall did not kill him; he was able to rise to his knees and pray for them. It was a wonderful sight — that man of noble presence, with the long locks streaming over his shoulders, and his white robe stained with blood, kneeling in the Temple court among his furious enemies! One of the bystanders pleaded for him; but a fuller came up and dashed out his brains with a club.'

'The cup of that nation's iniquity is full,' said Pomponia, who had listened with a shudder to this tale of martyrdom.

'It is,' said Julius. 'Immediately after I had witnessed this sad scene, I was talking to a brilliant young priest in Jerusalem named Josephus, of whose abilities they think highly, and who evidently has a great future before him. He made the same remark.'

'But tell us something about that wonderful prisoner whom you brought to Rome,' said Titus.

Julius detailed to them his voyage, the storm when they

drifted so long up and down Adria in the starless nights and sunless days; the strong influence of the Jewish prisoner over the whole crew; the spirit which he breathed into their despair; the practical wisdom of all his counsels; the intense gratitude which he had kindled in the Protos of Malta and in the barbarous inhabitants, by what they believed to be a miraculous healing. 'His teaching,' he added, 'is the most wonderful thing I ever heard.'

'What can a Jew really teach?' asked Seneca, with some disdain.

'He preaches that their Prophet whom Pilatus crucified, was God Himself,' said Julius; 'and no sane man can believe that. But there is a sort of supernatural spell about the goodness of this Paulus; and when I hear him speak to "the brethren," as he calls the Christians, I am always reminded of Homer's lines —

> 'In thought profound
> His modest eyes he fixed upon the ground;
> But when he speaks, what elocution flows,
> Soft as the fleeces of descending snows!
> The copious accents fall with easy art,
> Melting they fall, and sink into the heart.'

'He may have the gift of speech,' said Seneca; 'many Orientals have. But it is monstrous to suppose that a fanatical Jew, with a senseless creed, should have anything to teach us.'

'Has he written anything?' asked Flavius Sabinus.

'Yes; he has written some wonderful letters — a strange mixture (as friends in Palestine told me) of fantastic doctrine and perfect ethics.'

'Has he taught a single moral truth which has not been taught for four centuries, since Aristotle and Plato and Chrysippus?' asked Seneca.

'I have not read his letters,' said Julius. 'They were difficult to get hold of, for the Christians are very shy about their writings. But he *lives* the truth he teaches.'

'Ah!' said Seneca; 'if he has the secret of that —! As for us, too many of us are open to the reproach that we are only philosophers by wearing beards.'

'Well,' said Titus, 'I have been to hear the lectures of Musonius Rufus, and I defy any mortal man to teach better

truths than he and Cornutus do ; for I must not speak of the illustrious Seneca in his presence. We have no need to consult barbarian Jews with insane new mythologies.'

Pomponia and Claudia and Pudens were of necessity silent in that mixed company ; but they thought that the good soil of the Christian faith was the one thing lacking to Seneca, which might have made the roses of his moral teaching produce something better than mere perfume.

And if Titus had but laid aside the ignorant disdain which marked him in common with the mass of philosophic Pagans, his manly virtues might have shone forth with yet more beautiful lustre, and he might have been saved from the sins and errors wherewith he afterwards defiled a noble name.

CHAPTER XLV

POPPÆA VICTRIX

'On that hard pagan world disgust
And secret loathing fell;
Deep weariness and sated lust
Made human life a hell.'
MATTHEW ARNOLD.

NOT long after the arrival of Paul at Rome, Burrus died. He was seized with inflammation of the throat, and Nero, under the pretence of solicitude, betrayed an ill-concealed satisfaction. He had not dared to get rid of Burrus, whom the Prætorians loved; but he fretted under the restraint of the soldier's presence, and resented an influence which endeavoured to exert itself for good. Nero could not mistake the innuendos of Tigellinus, that this was a good opportunity to set himself free. He promised to send Burrus a remedy recommended by his own physician. The remedy was a poison. Burrus perceived the fact too late. When Nero came to visit his sick bed, he turned away from him, with undisguised aversion.

'How are you, Præfect?' asked the Emperor, taking his hand as it lay on the coverlet.

Burrus hastily withdrew his hand. The question recalled to him the scene of the death of Scipio, the father-in-law of Pompey, who, seeing his ship in the possession of the enemy, stabbed himself, and on hearing the question, 'Where is the general?' answered, 'The general is well.' Burrus remained silent, but when the Emperor once more asked how he was, answered, 'I am well.' They were the last words he spoke, and every good man in Rome mourned the loss of one of the few virtuous men of whom the state could yet boast.

Nero might have bestowed the vacant command on the best soldier of his time, the brave and honest Corbulo, who had supported the fame of Roman courage on so many a hard-fought field,

He thought of no such man. In spite of Corbulo's utter loyalty Nero feared to trust him. He divided the office between Fenius Rufus and Sophonius Tigellinus. The former was popular from his generosity as corn commissioner in a time of famine, and it was hoped that the appointment would cover the deadly unpopularity of his colleague. But it was with Tigellinus that the real power rested. In his hands was the sword of Nero, and the secret of his influence lay in the similarity of his vices to those of the Emperor. The career of the man from boyhood upwards had been a career of infamy. He had been a lover of Agrippina, and of her sister, and he had paraded his crime with cynical coolness. With him Nero could always throw off the mask, and display the depths of his own turpitude. He was a tenth-rate Sejanus, only more deeply dyed in infamies. If he pandered to Nero's vices with sumptuous profligacy, this was part of a deep-laid design to drag the imperial purple through the foulest mire. But the scum of many nations which called itself the populace of Rome applauded each vileness, in proportion to its monstrosity, and was glad to see its Emperor the slave of passions as abject as its own. The degeneracy caused by such scenes was incredible. The ultimate result was that —

> 'Rome now might nowhere rid herself of Rome :
> The heavens were all distempered with the breath
> Of her old age. She, very nigh to death,
> Paced through her perishing world in search of air
> Unpoisoned by herself.'

Though Britannicus had been done to death, there were still two men who might stand seriously in the way of the new favourite's schemes. One was Faustus Cornelius Sulla, the last of that famous name. He was poor and slothful, but he had for a time been the husband of Antonia, the daughter of Claudius, and the freedman Graptus had already persuaded Nero to banish him to Marseilles, on a trumpery charge of complicity in a plot. Tigellinus persuaded Nero that Sulla only simulated indolence, and that he was tampering with the legions in Gaul. Executioners were sent to Marseilles, and Sulla was murdered as he lay at supper. Rubellius Plautus was the next victim. He had imperial blood in his veins, and many had fixed their eyes upon him with hope, for he was a man of Stoic dignity and domestic virtue. In A.D. 60, a comet

had been interpreted to indicate a change in the Empire, and Nero recommended Plautus, though he was only living the quiet life of an ordinary citizen, to retire to his estates in Asia. He obeyed without a murmur, living in simple duties with his wife Antistia, and devoting his thoughts to philosophy. Soldiers were now despatched to murder him. A faithful freedman, at imminent risk of his life, made his way to Asia, arrived before Nero's centurion, and warned Rubellius of his impending doom. He was the bearer of a letter from his father-in-law, Antistius Vetus, urging Rubellius not tamely to submit. Only sixty soldiers were coming to carry out the iniquitous mandate of Nero; let him repulse them, throw himself under the protection of Corbulo, and all would be well. But Rubellius was sickened by the thought of doubtful hopes. He wished, if possible, to avert, by submission, the future ruin of the wife and children whom he loved. Further than this, his philosophic teacher, Cœranus, persuaded him that a firm death was preferable to troubled and uncertain life. He therefore took no step in self-defence. The centurion found him at mid-day, stripped of his clothes, taking athletic exercise in his gymnasium, and butchered him on the spot, in the sight of the worthless eunuch, Pelago, whom Nero, as though he were some Asiatic despot, had sent to keep watch over the officer and soldiers. According to the ghastly fashion of the times his head was carried back to Nero. 'Why did you want to be a Nero?' said the brutal jester. 'Gods! what a nose the man had!'

Thus it was reserved for a Domitius Ahenobarbus to put to death Rubellius Plautus, the last descendant of Tiberius, as he afterwards put to death L. Junius Silanus, the last descendant of Augustus.

But there was an influence over Nero which was more powerful than that of all the other wretches of his Court. It was the influence of Poppæa. His infatuation for this beautiful, evil, astute woman had taken complete possession of him. She had led him on step by step, now alluring, now repelling him, keeping him ever in a maddening fever of passion, on which she played as on an instrument. Already she had sufficiently established her empire over him to permit of his sending Otho to Lusitania. Nor had she hesitated to leave her home and to become an inmate of Nero's Palace.

But it was far from her intention to sink into the humble position which had been enough for Acte, who, in her ignorance, had felt for Nero a love ten times more genuine than that which she had inspired. Poppæa, whose infantine and cherubic loveliness could easily have secured for her the hand of the noblest of the patricians, intended to be Empress and nothing less. She knew the evanescent character of such love as she had kindled, and she bent the powers of her mind to rule Nero by playing with his hopes. There was but one obstacle in the path of her ambition. Octavia still lived, and Octavia must be got rid of.

It is true that the hapless Empress had long been reduced to a cipher by the mutual repulsion of herself and her husband. She could scarcely help shrinking from his touch. To look in his face made her shudder. While still in the charm of youth he had been odious to her. Now that his face was unhealthy with excess, his cruel frown and lowering countenance wore in her eyes the look of a demon. His faithlessness did not wound her, for the gleams of happiness which rarely illumined the tragedy of her life came to her only when he neglected her utterly. Nevertheless, she was Empress. She had the undeniable rights of her position, and in public it was necessary for Nero to treat with decency the daughter of the divine Claudius and the granddaughter of the beloved Germanicus.

Yet Poppæa had determined that, on one pretext or other, she should be set aside, and never doubted that sooner rather than later she would goad the timid Emperor to repudiate his wife, that he might be free for another marriage.

One day when Poppæa knew that Nero intended to visit her she prepared all her wiles. He came in after the mid-day prandium, and he found her reclining on her couch of ivory and silver in the cool, well-shaded, voluptuously-furnished room. She had let loose over her shoulders the splendid ripples of her golden tresses. An odour as of blown roses clung to her person and her robes. Every jewel that she wore, whether ruby, or sapphire, or emerald, or diamond, was so arranged as to set off her soft and glowing complexion, and there was exquisite grace in her way of handling the fan of peacock's feathers which swept in iridescent glory over her dress from the golden handle which drooped from her right

hand. Nero, as he took his seat beside her, felt like a clumsy and awkward boy.

'Why do you pretend to love me, Nero?' she asked.

'Love you!' he said. 'It is not love, it is passion, it is adoration!'

'Words are all very well, Nero,' she said, in a voice which seemed to tremble with tears; 'but see how you treat me! When I came to the Palace you were not Emperor, but the slave of Agrippina. I helped you to free yourself from that bondage. You have taken me from Otho, my dear and noble husband —'

Nero frowned angrily, but Poppæa took no notice.

'You have,' she continued, 'banished him to Lusitania, and have brought me to this dull Court, under pretence that you would make me Empress. Yet I am no nearer becoming your wife. Go to your pale, sad Octavia: doubtless you think her common features fairer than mine. Her dreary talk and drearier silence cannot fail to be more fascinating.'

'I loathe her,' said Nero.

'And she loathes you, whereas I worship the ground you tread upon. No, no!' she said, as he attempted to seize her hand; 'I will not live here to be your mere plaything. I will rejoin Otho in Lusitania. He loves me, and knows how to treat me properly.'

Nero rose in a passion. Fearful lest she should goad him too far, Poppæa called him to her side and changed her tone.

'Your home is empty, Nero,' she said. 'No child will succeed you. I have a little son. Octavia must be dismissed, if you would have an heir to be Emperor of Rome.'

'How can I dismiss her?' said Nero gloomily. 'Even my freedmen espouse her cause. Doryphorus is for her, and Pallas.'

'Doryphorus! Pallas!' she repeated, with a laugh of ringing scorn. 'An effeminate slave-minion; a miserly dotard! Tush, Cæsar! be a man. Sweep aside these flies. Poison them both; no one will miss Doryphorus, and Pallas has riches which will prove very convenient to you.'

'That shall be done,' said Nero. 'I am sick of Doryphorus, and Pallas has lived long enough. But to repudiate Octavia is different. She is strong in the name of her father, and stronger still in the favour of the people and the Prætorians.'

'Is Cæsar truly Cæsar?' she asked, with contempt.

'Cæsar can do what he likes in his own private life,' he answered; 'but woe to Cæsar if he degrade the majesty of Empire by any public deed.'

He said truly, and she knew it; but she knew also that he had not yet fathomed, as she had done, the abysses of Roman servility. Had they not applauded him after the murder of Agrippina? Had they not passed in silence the murder of Britannicus? Had they not suffered the doom of Sulla and of Plautus to pass by without creating so much as a ripple on the surface of the general tranquillity?

By her urgency, by her wiles, by her taunts, by the supreme ascendency which she had now acquired over the Emperor, she prevailed on him at length to divorce Octavia on the plea of her barrenness, and to make Poppæa his wife. This, however, did not content her, while her unhappy rival remained an inmate of the Palace. Poppæa therefore endeavoured to blacken her character. She put into play every poisonous art of slander. In most cases nothing was easier than to trump up a false charge against any one whom the Emperor desired to ruin. The white innocence of Octavia, her stainless purity in that age of infamy, were no protection to her. The faithful love of her few attendants was a partial safeguard. Most of them were tampered with in vain. At last, however, a worthless Alexandrian flute-player, who had sometimes played before her to while away a heavy hour, was induced by a great bribe to swear that he had been her lover. The charge was too monstrous to deceive a single person, but on this pretext Octavia's handmaids were seized and tortured. The majority, however, stood firm even against the torture-chamber, and one of them, named Pythias, cried out to Tigellinus, as he heightened the torture and pressed her with questions, that Octavia's worst offence was white as snow beside the blackness of his best virtues. It was impossible to pretend a conviction on evidence which would have been invalid against the humblest slave.

It was, nevertheless, decided that Octavia should be removed from the Palatine, and she was sent from the home of her father with the ill-omened gifts of the estate of Plautus as her dower, and the house of Burrus as her residence.

The unhappy girl — she was but nineteen — obeyed with-

out a murmur. She had wept floods of tears when her husband, instigated by his cruel paramour, had attempted to stain her name. She shed no tear when she laid aside the purple of the Empress, and, clad in the simplest garb of a Roman matron, was conveyed to her new home. Thither, too, were sent her unhappy maidens. Those who had most enjoyed her confidence — and among these the poor Christian girl, Tryphæna — were still disabled by the dislocations of the torture. With tenderest solicitude Octavia herself visited their cells, and ministered to their infirmities. She flung her arms, weeping, round Tryphæna's neck, and thanked her and Pythias for the heroic constancy with which they had held out and, when stretched on the rack, had unflinchingly asseverated the stainless honour of their mistress.

'How could you endure it, Tryphæna?' she asked. 'The blood of the Claudii and of deified emperors flows in my veins, yet if my frame had been wrenched with such pangs, I know not what my lips might not have said.'

'Lady,' said the slave-girl, 'I hardly felt it. The spirit sustained the body. I thought of —'

'Go on,' said Octavia.

'I thought of Him of whom I have read to you in the letter of Peter of Bethsaida; and how He had endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself; and I was not weary, and did not faint in my mind.'

'How could the Crucified One help you?'

'He is not the Crucified One now,' answered Tryphæna. 'He is the Risen, the Ascended: and He sits on the right hand of the Father.'

'Oh that I could believe all this!' said Octavia. 'I have scarcely had a happy hour in all my life. I have been more miserable than any slave-girl. If He whom you called the Risen One were all that you say, why does He not help the innocent?'

'He does help them,' she said. 'Not by delivering them out of all their troubles, but by enabling them to bear, and by making them feel that their brief troubles, which are but for a moment, are nothing to the eternal weight of glory.'

'Did He help you?'

'He did. As I lay outstretched on the rack I saw Him for a moment, His hand upraised to bless.'

'Does He do so for all Christians when they suffer?'

'I think He does, for all His true children. Lady, do you know that Paulus of Tarsus — the Apostle whose letters to the churches I have read to you — is in Rome?'

'So Pomponia told me,' said Octavia, 'and she asked if I would not see him. But how can I? Burrus is dead, and Paulus sits chained to a Prætorian soldier in his own lodging.'

'He has friends who would bring you his teachings,' said Tryphæna. 'One of them I have seen. His name is Lucas of Antioch, and he is a physician. To comfort me after I had been tortured, he told me how Paulus, before his conversion — when he was a blasphemer, and persecutor, and injurious — had witnessed and even incited the stoning of our first martyr, the young deacon Stephen; and how when Stephen stood before the Council, and they were all gnashing their teeth at him, his face was as an angel's. And he says that Stephen saw the heavens opened, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.'

While Octavia stood talking with the young slave-girl, she was told that Pomponia had come to see her, and humbly kissing the poor sufferer on the brow, she went to the tablinum to receive her guest.

'Wherever sorrow is, there Pomponia comes,' she said, embracing her.

'That is not my individual virtue,' said Pomponia. 'We Christians are *all* taught to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgives us.'

'Your faith seems to make you all very happy.'

'It does indeed. Oh, if you could see our Paulus, how would he comfort you!'

'What made him a Christian?' asked Octavia. 'Tryphæna has just been telling me that he was once a persecutor.'

'He saw a vision of Christ, as he went to extirpate the Christians at Damascus. From that time he has preached the faith which he once destroyed. While Burrus lived the guards were bidden to leave him when his friends came, but since Tigellinus has been Præfect his lot is harder. I know not how you can with safety visit him. But his friend and companion is Lucas the physician. Why should you not have him sent for to tend your poor wounded slaves?'

The hint was taken. Octavia's household was now a very simple and quiet one. The swarm of courtiers had deserted her. None of the fine ladies of Rome who desired the approval of Nero, came near her gate. The last of the great house of the Claudii, the wife and daughter and descendant of emperors, was left to her seclusion, and she rejoiced in it. She spun wool among her maidens; she was considerate of the happiness of her slaves. She manumitted Pythias and Tryphæna, who had suffered for her. Fair peace began to reign around her, and she nursed the hope that she might be suffered to live out her life in quietude until a fairer day should haply dawn. Lucas was summoned, and to her, as to the Christians of her household, he proved himself to be indeed also a physician of the soul.

He was an Asiatic in the prime of life, with a countenance singularly radiant and refined. He spoke the purest Greek, and had been accustomed to the society of Theophilus of Antioch and other persons of rank, to whom he had been endeared by his medical skill. Already, during the imprisonment of Paulus at Cæsarea, he had busied himself in the collection of those facts which he was soon to enroll in 'the most beautiful book in all the world.' It was common for Roman families to listen to readings from accomplished Greeks, and it was not difficult for Octavia, with the aid of Pomponia and her Christian slaves, to arrange that Lucas should read to them his yet unfinished records of the Life of the Saviour. Those records, and the conversations which she held with the Evangelist, and his answers to her questions, at last convinced the heart of the Empress. She saw that in the faith of the gospel there was a peace, a beauty, a blessedness, such as she had never known, of which she had never dreamed. Perilous as the decision was, she determined to be admitted by baptism into the flock of Christ. One morning, at break of day, in the presence of Lucas, Pomponia, and Tryphæna, but otherwise in the deepest secrecy, she was baptised by Linus.

And thenceforth there reigned in her heart a peace which no further waves of trouble could disturb. She began to understand why it was that, in spite of her mourning garb, in spite of her many trials, Pomponia, though her face was often sad, was far happier than any of the Roman matrons.

She began to experience that there is a bliss in faith and hope and love which the world can neither give nor take away.

And this boon of heaven only came just in time to save her from sinking into utter despair under the horrible tempest of afflictions which fell upon her.

For though Nero would have been content to dismiss her into obscurity and oblivion, Poppæa was not content. She wearied the Emperor with her insistence that he should take still further steps against his repudiated wife. Nero ordered Octavia to leave Rome and live in Campania.

As she was preparing to obey the insulting order, which was rendered still more insulting by the addition that she was to be kept under military surveillance, it struck Pomponia that it might add to the comfort and safety of the Empress if she could once more command the services of Onesimus. Octavia had been pleased with his assiduity when he was her purple-keeper, and she knew that he had once rendered a high service to her beloved Britannicus. In the solitudes of Campania it would be well for her to have at hand a slave and messenger whom she could implicitly trust. With the precaution of a disguise he might remain unrecognised, and serve as a medium of communication between the ex-Empress and her friends in Rome. Onesimus was more than willing to undertake the charge. At Rome he was never safe. After all that had occurred, he did not dare to enter the secret assemblies of the Christians, though it was there alone that he could hope to see Junia. After Octavia had started with her despised and scanty retinue, he made his way to her villa with letters from Pomponia, and was retained in her service as a Greek reader, under a changed name.

But scarcely had his wife vanished from Rome when Nero became alarmed by the temper of the people. They openly murmured at his conduct. In the circus and the amphitheatre they received him with grim silence or cold applause. He knew that the mob was his ultimate master, and, being a coward, he hastily sent word that Octavia might return to Rome and resume the style and title of his wife.

When this edict was published, the people went wild with joy. All loved Octavia. No base, no cruel action, no rapacity or folly, could be laid to her charge. If deadly crimes

were committed, they knew that Octavia disapproved of them no less entirely than themselves. Every honest citizen who enjoyed but one gleam of happiness on his own domestic hearth pitied the pale and neglected daughter of Claudius, and felt inclined to protect her from further wrongs. Their enthusiasm communicated itself to the crowd. When Octavia re-entered Rome they surrounded her litter with tumults of delight. Their affection cheered her heart, and, stirred by her words of gratitude, they broke into dangerous excitement. Rushing through the city, they flung down and trampled and spat upon the statues of Poppæa. Those of Octavia they uplifted on their shoulders, showered blossoms over them, and, carrying them to the Forum and the temples, crowned them with garlands. They shouted their approval of Nero's tardy repentance, and, donning their holiday attire, organised an immense procession to the Capitol, to thank Jupiter for the restoration of their Empress. Returning from this procession they crowded to the Palatine, and Nero in alarm appealed to the Prætorians. Tigellinus let loose the soldiers upon the people. He had armed them with batons, and they struck out without discrimination among the swaying mob. When this was insufficient to disperse the crowd, they drew their swords, and charged them in close array. It was night before they had swept the streets clear of obstruction, and replaced the statues of Poppæa upon their pedestals.

Poppæa was nearly wild with fear and hatred. After Nero had supped she entered his room, and, flinging herself at his feet with dishevelled hair, burst into passionate tears. She wailed that, though to wed with him was dearer to her than life, she had now come, not to plead for her marriage, but for mere safety. Who did he suppose was the real author of that disgraceful riot? Octavia, of course. He thought her simple. Her simplicity was but the veneer of deeply-seated cunning. Was it the people who had broken into sedition? Not at all. It was only the clientage and varletry of Octavia who had dared to assume the people's name. If they had but found a leader, who could say whether Nero might not by this time have been a fugitive or a mangled corpse?

'The tumult has been aimed at you,' she cried, 'not at me. What harm have I done to any one, that they should hate me?

Do they hate me because I shall give Cæsar a genuine heir? Do they prefer the offspring of Octavia and some Egyptian flute-player? Be a man, Nero! It only needs the smallest display of resolution to suppress these disorders. But if you show yourself timid and incapable, the rebellion may become formidable. If the people despair of making you Octavia's husband, they may make Octavia another's wife.'

The daring and indomitable purpose of the woman succeeded. She goaded his timidity; she fired his rage. He sent for Tigellinus, determined at last to stop short at nothing.

With Tigellinus he needed no concealment.

'Præfect,' he said, 'Octavia must at all costs be got rid of.'

'Locusta is here,' said Tigellinus, with alacrity.

'No, no,' said Nero, stamping on the ground; 'I will not have the scene of Britannicus acted over again. I am haunted by too many ghosts already.'

'Devise something,' he said, impatiently, while Tigellinus mused. 'Poppæa, suggest something to this fool.'

'A charge must be made against her,' said Poppæa, eager if possible to shame as well as to kill.

'The last charge broke down.'

'Nonsense!' answered Poppæa. 'Say that you have positive evidence that she has made away with her own unborn child.'

'No one will believe it. And, besides, I have just divorced her on the charge of barrenness.'

'Say it all the same, Nero. Some person of importance must be induced to confess.'

'Who would be so infamous?' said Nero. 'After all, Poppæa, you know she is innocent — ten times more innocent than you.'

'Call me some infamous name at once,' said Poppæa, bursting into passion. 'And is it for you to taunt me? Was it not for love of you that I became faithless to my Otho? No,' she cried, as Nero approached her; 'keep away from me! I will return to the wronged Otho. He loved me. He will take me back.' And she rushed towards the door.

'Poppæa,' pleaded Nero, hasting to intercept her flight, 'forgive me. You see how miserable I am. I have no one to love me but you.'

'And who could help loving you?' she continued, weeping

crocodile tears in floods. 'Who could resist those golden locks, that lovely countenance, that divine voice?'

Her cajolery won the day. Nero played with her hand, and turned an inquiring look on the Prætorian Præfect.

'I have it,' said Tigellinus. 'Send for Anicetus.'

Nero winced at the name. Anicetus was still admiral of the fleet at Misenum; but, since his share in the murder of Agrippina, Nero could never see him without recalling the image of his mother's blood-stained corpse. He had practically banished Anicetus from Court, and when the sunshine of court favour was withdrawn from him, the wretch had sunk into contempt. But now his unscrupulosity was once more needed for a crime which was, if possible, still blacker. He had murdered Nero's mother by violence; he was to murder Nero's wife by calumny. He was offered a vast reward, and a purely nominal punishment, if he would confess and make it public that Octavia had treasonably tampered with him, to seduce the allegiance of the imperial sailors at Misenum, and that, in furtherance of her object, she had not stopped short of offering him her hand.

The infamous tale was published; and since Nero proclaimed his conviction of its truth, the world was compelled to profess belief in it also, although every man and woman in Rome knew it to be a lie. An edict was published proclaiming Octavia's guilt, and she was banished to the dreary islet of Pandataria.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE DEATH OF OCTAVIA

'O gioia! O ineffabile allegrezza!
O vita intera d' amore e di pace!
O senza brama sicura ricchezza!'

DANTE, *Paradiso*, xxvii. 7–9.

IN one sense all the people of Rome were the friends of Octavia; in another she was nearly friendless. For the multitudes of every rank were degraded by selfishness and cowed by terror. So long as they were personally untouched by the orgies and crimes of the Emperor, and so long as he was supported by the swords of the Prætorians, they neither wished nor dared to interfere. Rome lay helpless under the bonds of the tyranny which her own vices had riveted. Nero might indeed be murdered, but in what respect would the Empire be better off? There was no Cæsar left. If Nero died, there seemed to be no prospect for Rome except the horrors of civil war with all its attendant pillage, massacre, and crime. It seemed better to endure Nero's infamies than to see the Empire torn to pieces. After all, were not many of the senators, of the generals, of the aristocracy, capable of becoming as licentious and as cruel as he was, and would not their elevation make their vices loom as monstrous as his?

They rejoiced, therefore, that the popular tumult had been so speedily repressed, and they steeped their consciences in immoral acquiescence. The bad plunged themselves yet more shamelessly into vice, and manœuvred to make their vices known as a passport to imperial favour. As for the better Romans, they tried to bury themselves in such obscurity as would shelter them from notice; or they sought solace in the refined egotism of the Epicureans; or inured themselves to the chances of death and ruin by assuming the haughty self-dependence of the later Stoics. Pætus Thrasea and his friends took refuge in the belief that it would be an absurdity to

attempt the impossible. The heart of Seneca was torn with misgivings; but was not he himself in peril? What could he do? He had never spoken out against any one of Nero's crimes, or lifted a finger to prevent them. Lucan longed to overwhelm the Emperor with invective; but he could only brood in silence over his wrongs, and gloomily await the day of vengeance.

From none of these did Octavia receive any help. If they compassionated her misery, no murmur of pity reached her ears. But from those who were now her fellow-Christians she received both help and consolation. Pomponia, whose gentle influence moved fearlessly with halcyon wings over the turbid abyss of crime, exerted herself to add comfort to the dreary retreat of the Empress in the volcanic isle. With her strong good sense she made arrangements for Octavia's comfort. She obtained the leave of her husband, Aulus Plautius, to despatch some of her slaves to Pandataria the very day that the decree of Octavia's banishment was published, with directions to secure for her as fitting a home as was possible, and to take with them such things as might conduce to her well-being. In this she was secretly aided by Acte. The beautiful and generous girl sought an interview with Octavia before she left Campania, fell at her knees, and begged the daughter of Claudius to pardon the wrong which in earlier days her beauty had inflicted. 'I was but a slave once,' she said; 'nor did I know the truths which have since been taught me. I have forsaken the past. Empress, you will forgive me, and accept such little services as I can render?'

'Rise, Acte!' said Octavia, with tender dignity. 'I know that thy heart was innocent, and that no wiles of thine were spread to catch Nero's love. I forgive thee. Who am I, in my misery, that I should condemn thee?'

She raised the weeping girl from the ground, and gently kissed her. 'Do not weep any more,' she said. 'Acte, it has been told me that thou art a Christian. Nay, start not, and see how much I trust thee. I am a Christian, too.'

Acte was almost speechless with surprise; but Octavia continued: 'Yes; thou seest that I put my life in thy hands; but are we not sisters now? I used to talk with my brother Britannicus about this new faith, and often with Pomponia,

and now I have seen Lucas of Antioch, and from him I have heard of Jesus. Lucas has lent me the letters of Paulus of Tarsus. He has written that "not many rich, not many noble, not many mighty are called;" but though I am noble, I am poor, and weak, and unhappy except for that consolation which He who died for us sends to the sorrowful.'

'God be praised,' said Acte, 'that thou hast found that peace.'

'Yes,' answered the Empress; 'peace I can truly say in the midst of shame, and slander, and tumult. My life will be short; but for us, Acte, the islands of the blest, of which the poets sang, are neither dreams nor fables. Farewell.'

'Farewell, Empress,' said Acte. 'Day and night will our brethren lift up holy hands for thee, and many a purer prayer than mine will rise for thee like incense.'

As Acte left the villa she passed Onesimus. She had long been ignorant of his fate, and shame prevented him from speaking to her. He recognised her at a glance, but she did not penetrate the disguise which changed him into a fair-haired slave, and he shrank back from her presence. He regretted when it was too late that he had not revealed himself to her, for even now she might possibly have retarded the tragedies which were to ensue. Alas! when once men have shown themselves unfaithful, how often do their best impulses come too late!

But he devoted himself heart and soul to the service of the young Empress. She had been permitted to take with her into exile one or two only of her hundreds of slaves. She had chosen Tryphæna to be one of these, though the poor girl, after her cruel torments, was still barely able to stand. She had also chosen Onesimus, by the advice of Pomponia, though she did not yet know that he had been brought under Christian influence.

Nor was he the only disguised Christian in that small and saddened household. The position of Hermas since his rescue from the house of Pedanius had been very perilous. If he were recognised, the fact of his having escaped might be fatal to others besides himself. The Christians were mostly too poor to introduce a stranger into their households. They would have been willing to share with each other the last

crust; but the crowded state of the *insulæ*,[1] in which they mostly lived, rendered it difficult and dangerous to procure extra accommodation. The only thing possible, therefore, had been to conceal him in the house of Pudens; but as it was now necessary to find a new home for him he had been enrolled among the out-door slaves in the villa of the Empress, and was selected to accompany her to the lonely island, until his history and face should have been forgotten.

Anicetus, who had been made the vile instrument of Octavia's destruction, received the guerdon of his infamy, and was dismissed into nominal exile in Sardinia. To such a man — a slave by birth and a villain by nature — the exile was nothing. He had never regarded life as anything but a feeding-trough, and as long as he had wealth to spend on his own indulgences Sardinia served him as well as Rome. It happened that the ship which was to carry him to Caralis, the Sardinian capital, sailed from Ostia on the day that Octavia was to be conveyed to Pandataria. Thousands of spectators, and among them many Christians, had flocked to Ostia to see her embark. If they dared not express their feelings, they longed at least silently to show their sympathy. They recognised Anicetus. He embarked amid a tempest of groans and hootings so full of execration that he trembled lest he should be torn to pieces by the mob, and abjectly entreated the protection of his guards. Thenceforth he vanishes from history. He died in Sardinia, rich and impenitent; but even there he did not escape the hatred which he felt more than the load of infamy with which he had crushed down his worthless soul.

Later in the afternoon the multitudes caught sight of the litter which was bearing Octavia to the shore. A trireme was waiting to take her away forever from the home of the rulers of the world. Prætorian guards marched on either side of her with drawn swords. Behind her, in a humble *carruca*, came her few household slaves, and the scanty possessions which alone she could take with her. A deep murmur of pity arose, and as she approached the quay it swelled into a cheer, in which the spectators gave vent to the indignation which they felt against her oppressors. At one time it seemed as if they might break out into violence; but the

[1] The *insulæ* were large, isolated lodging-houses.

Prætorians menaced them with their swords, and the angry murmurs died away.

The Christians — who recognised Tryphæna and others of their brethren among Octavia's slaves, and who, though they did not know the secret of Octavia's conversion, knew her innocence — showed their sympathy in more quiet ways. They sighed forth prayers and blessings, and strewed with flowers her pathway to the vessel. Onesimus, as he passed, caught sight of Nereus and Junia. No one knew him, but he felt almost certain that he had seen a flash of recognition in Junia's eyes. Beyond doubt she stood gazing intently on him as he leaned over the vessel's side. Ah, well! the day might come, he thought, when, purified from shame by suffering, he might obliterate the memories of his dishonoured past, and be worthy once more to stand by her side.

And one incident occurred which, not for him only, but for all that little company, was fraught with blessed consequences. Linus stood with Luke of Antioch in the undistinguished throng, but neither of them had been forgetful of the sorrowful sighing of those who were going into captivity. Linus had told to Paul the prisoner, in deep secrecy, the story of Octavia's baptism, and the heart of the Apostle was sad at the thought of her sufferings. He had written her a brief letter of comfort, which Linus slid into the hand of Hermas amid the bustle of the embarkation. Nor was this all. Luke also had not been forgetful of the anguish of the last of the Claudian house. Filled with that deep sense of brotherhood which linked all ranks together in the Christian community, he had written out for the exiles some inestimably precious fragments of the materials which he had been collecting for his Gospel. He found means unobserved to give them to Tryphæna, when ceasing for a moment to lean on the arms of the two slaves who were supporting her feeble footsteps, she turned to bid farewell to her mother, Nympha.

The emotion of the spectators made it more easy for the watchful Christians to communicate with each other. For there were few dry eyes among them. Some of them were old enough to have seen Julia, the lovely daughter of Augustus, sail to the island of Trimerus. They had seen her daughter, the younger Julia, banished by Claudius to the yet more distant island of Pandataria. They had wept tears almost

as bitter when they saw the elder Agrippina driven to the same prison by the insatiable malice of Tiberius. But the case of Octavia was far sadder than that of her noble kinswomen. The elder Julia was steeped in shame, and had well-nigh broken the heart of her father. The younger Julia had also disgraced her high lineage. The wife of Germanicus had been a Roman matron of the purest stamp, yet her passionate haughtiness had diminished the sympathy which would otherwise have been felt with her in her calamities. And, further, these others had enjoyed their days of superb sunlight and prosperity. Ruin had not overtaken them till the happiness and beauty of their youth were past. Not so the pale and hapless girl who was now embarking. Octavia had known no joy. Her childhood had been darkened by the three murders of those whom she best loved. From the first her husband had hated her. His youthful love had been given, not to her, but to her freedwoman; and now, unprotected by her own white innocence, she had been smitten to the earth by a horribly false condemnation. She was still scarcely twenty years old![1] And she was being conducted amid centurions and soldiers to a barren rock, which was haunted by memories of death and anguish. She was as one dead, but without the peace of death: — so thought her pagan sympathisers, and were confirmed in their misgiving that either there are no gods or they care not for the affairs of men.

And Octavia did not deceive herself. She well knew that those islets of the Tyrrhene Sea were wet with the blood of noble exiles; and that Caligula, on being told by one who had been recalled from banishment that the exiles spent their time in praying for the death of the reigning Emperor, had sent soldiers round the islands to put all the prisoners to death. She knew her peril, but she clung to life with the tenacity of youth. Nero had no child. She thought that his excesses would precipitate his end, and that some virtuous man might be chosen by the Senate to succeed. After the death of Narcissus she had been told the anecdote of the physiognomist who had prophesied that Titus would one day be Emperor, and she thought that under her brother's devoted friend there might be the dawn of brighter days. She therefore wrote a letter to Nero, before the trireme started, in which she said she would

[1] Note 40. — Age of Octavia.

but live as his widow and his sister, with no thought of returning to the Palace. She even ventured to remind him that she had always experienced his mother's protection, and that, as long as Agrippina lived, her marriage dignity had not been assailed.

All was now ready. The sailors drew up the anchor, and the assembled crowd watched the white sails of the trireme till they became rosy in the light of sunset, and the vessel dipped beneath the horizon.

Octavia awaited, in deep anxiety, the answer to her letter. There were points in it which might perhaps have touched the heart of Nero if Poppæa and Tigellinus had not been at his elbow as the evil genii of his degradation. But, when the tablets of Octavia came, Nero was sitting with the enchantress. Taking them out of his hands, she turned the letter into such ridicule, and laughed over it so sweetly and so immoderately, and mixed her silvery laughter with so many acts of fascination, that the fear of her ridicule — to which, like all vain persons, Nero was inordinately sensitive — quenched in his heart all thoughts of mercy. She also played upon his fears. 'As long as Octavia lives,' she said, 'neither you nor I will be safe. You saw how the people rose in her behalf. You do not know what assassins she may have in her pay. All that the spirit of insurrection needs is a leader, and, while Octavia lives, conspirators have only to provide her with a husband, and she will bring him the Empire as her dower, as she did to you. The tomb is the only safe prison. The dead excite no tumult and tell no tales.'

So the messenger was sent back without an answer, and Octavia knew that she had only to prepare for her fate. No day dawned that might not be her last; no sail shone on the horizon which might not be bringing her executioners from Rome — nay, the orders might even now be in possession of her military guard, and the tramp of the changing sentries each morning and evening might be to her the echoing foot-fall of death. No situation in the world is more harrowing or more terrific than this. We can confront death when we know that we stand face to face with him; but to have his sword dangling over our necks by a thread of gossamer, and not to know at what moment it will fall; to know that somewhere near us he lies in wait, but not to know where or how he will

leap out upon us — this adds a nameless dread to the king of terrors, and it has been sufficient to break down the iron nerves even of trained soldiers who have ridden fearlessly to many a bloody fight.

There was not a person on the little island who was not aware that Octavia was thus standing on the edge of the awful precipice. Great, therefore, was the astonishment of all, and especially of the Roman soldiers, at the strange placidity, the sweet fortitude which she displayed. None else could laugh during those sad days; but she could laugh — laugh more gaily than she had ever done in the gorgeous chambers of the Palatine. As escape was impossible, she was left free, and she loved to sit on the rocks in the evening sunlight and enjoy the cooler breeze. Unfamiliar with the sea-shore, it was a pleasure to her to watch the black-headed sea-mews rising and falling on the gentle swell of the tideless waters, or waving over it their immaculate white wings, or suddenly dashing down on some fish, and breaking the surface into concentric rings of rippled gold. She found pleasure in the shells, and sea-weeds, and purple medusæ, and laughed again and again as she noticed for the first time the curious motion of the hippocampi as they gambolled in the shallow waves. It was strange, too, to the few islanders to see her gathering garlands of their wild flowers, and having them placed in her bare, half-furnished rooms. She had never cared for splendour. It wearied a soul which had never seen it dissociated from guilt. The simplicity of her new life had a charm for her, and if Nero would but relent she could gladly live here, reading and doing her little acts of kindness and musing on the high thoughts which had recently become so radiant to her — sustained by the hope that better days would come on earth, or that, if not, there was a heaven beyond.

There were three of her household who knew the secret of the calm and resignation which struck her Prætorian custodians with astonishment. One of the officers, a rough youth named Vulfenius, had been heard saying to his comrade that the Empress must have been getting private lessons from the Stoics or Cynics; — 'only,' he said, 'a hundred of those philosophers are not worth a cracked farthing — arrant humbugs nearly all of them. But this girl — she smiles death in the face! — Or is it that she does not know?'

Yes, she knew; but the source of her cheerful courage lay in those scrolls which had been handed to her attendants by Linus and by Luke. Ever since the lustral dews of baptism had touched her brow, she had felt a change in her whole being, but her deep peace was confirmed by what was now read to her daily by Onesimus, or Hermas, or Tryphæna.

It was with strange feelings that when she broke the silken thread of the small waxen tablets of Linus, she had read the salutation in which Paulus, the prisoner, wished grace, mercy, and peace to Octavia, Empress, and now beloved in Christ. But as she eagerly read the few lines which he had engraved with his trembling stylus — for he had written this message in large letters with his own hand — she felt his words thrill into her soul with strange power. He rejoiced and thanked God that He had called her out of darkness into His marvellous light, and told her that this was a boon more precious than all the kingdoms of the world. He comforted her under all the affliction with which she was afflicted, with the comfort wherewith he too was comforted of God. He told her that she was a partaker of the sufferings of Christ, and that the sufferings of this present time were not worthy to be compared with that glory which shall be revealed in us. He exhorted her to look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Such words fall too often on our cold and careless ears with the triteness of long familiarity; but to Octavia, as to all who first learnt to feel their meaning in that despairing age, they seemed to be written in sunbeams. The new wine of the Kingdom of Heaven filled them as with divine intoxication; that which to the Pagans appeared like a half-insane enthusiasm or a blank obstinacy [1] was, in truth, but the exhilaration of conviction, in comparison with whose preciousness the whole world and all the glory of it seemed but as the light dust of the balances. Octavia had not been unaccustomed to hear the paradoxes of the Stoics; and she regarded them as spurious ornaments of life's misery — spangles sewed upon its funeral pall. But in the words of Paul the prisoner, and of the poor persecuted Christians, there rang tones of perfect sincerity. Their doctrines were not *learnt*, but *lived*. They

[1] Note 41. — Christian Fortitude.

came attested by the evidence of characters not only innocent but holy; such as had been hitherto unknown to the world, and had no antitype even in the fabled age of gold. They came, morever, as the revelation of a law, not only general, but individual. In those who had grace to accept them, the Spirit Himself bore witness to their spirit that they were children of God.

Knowing the doom which trembled over Octavia's head, and the impossibility of her escape, the soldiers who were in charge were ordered to allow her such liberty as the little islet permitted, and not to intrude upon the occupations of her household. Hence, during the early evening hours, it was possible for her to call one or two of her Christian handmaids around her, while Onesimus, as the Greek reader, read to them the scrolls which Luke had sent as his parting present. He had selected those which he thought would convey the deepest consolation. As Onesimus read them to that little circle, they were as the oracular gems on Aaron's breast — Urim and Thummim ardent with the light of heaven. One of them was the Parable of the Prodigal Son. To Onesimus it was as the voice of God calling him back from the far country and the rags and the swine. As he read its concluding verses, again and again his voice was broken with sobs. Even when he had read it aloud on several evenings he could never come to the verse —

'I will arise, and go unto my Father, and will say unto Him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before Thee —'

without stopping to recover from the emotion which stifled his utterance, and the tears which blinded his sight.

Another little fragment contained the Evangelist's record of the Sermon on the Mount. As Octavia heard it she felt more and more that her miseries had been blessings in disguise, and that if her life had been spent in the blaze of luxury and prosperity she could never have become an inheritor of that kingdom of which the commands were not burdens but beatitudes.

But what came most deeply home to all of them was that scroll on which Luke had written the story of the Crucifixion. They could never hear it read without requiring Onesimus to read after it the record of the last scroll, which contained the

story of the two disciples at Emmaus, of whom it was privately thought among the Christians that Luke himself had been one. As Octavia listened to those inspired records, if the dreadful act of dying had not lost its horror, yet the grave had lost its victory, and death his sting.

Entranced by the rapture of these wondrous narratives, they had been reading later than usual. It was the ninth of June. The dusk of evening had fallen; the lamps had been lit. They had been too much absorbed to notice the Liburnian galley whose red sail on the horizon had attracted all the inhabitants of their rocky prison to the shore. They had not seen the Prætorians from Rome, who landed at the little jetty.

Ah! but they could not be deaf to the unwonted murmur which began to swell about the villa, nor to the clank of legionaries, nor to the gruff unfamiliar voices of command. They knew too well the meaning of those sounds. With faces whitened by terror they heard the summons at the gate, and the tramp of armed feet, and the cry, 'A message from the Emperor!' Hardly knowing what they did, Onesimus and Hermas barred the entrance to the chamber where they were sitting, while Tryphæna and the two other maidens grouped themselves round their mistress. There came a thundering challenge, followed by fierce blows rained upon the door. A moment afterwards it gave way with a crash. Hermas and Onesimus, as if by an instinctive motion, thrust themselves in the path of the advancing soldiers. A legionary struck down Hermas with the flat of his sword; Onesimus was dashed aside by a blow of the centurion's iron glaive. They tore away the slave-girls who clung to their fainting mistress. Her they fettered, and opened her veins in many places. But she had sunk into a swoon, and the blood would not flow. Then they dragged her to the bath, heated it to boiling heat, and suffocated her in the burning vapour.

Nor was this enough for Nero's vengeance. The corpse of the daughter of Claudius, the chaste wife of the Emperor, was not suffered to rest in peace. Poppæa would not be satisfied with anything short of the visible proof that her rival had

been swept forever out of her path. There lay the fair form, with its long dark hair and girlish beauty, and more beautiful than in life, for a look as of rapturous surprise had lit up her pale features. It availed not. The head was struck off by the centurion, and he carried to Rome the ghastly relic, at once to claim his reward, and to glut the eyes of Poppæa with the sight of 'death made proud by pure and princely beauty.'

And for this crime the slavish and degraded Senate vowed gifts to the temples! In those days every unjust banishment, every judicial murder inflicted by the Emperor, was the signal for a fresh outburst of infamous adulation. The thanksgivings to the gods, which had once been the signs of public prosperity, became the certain memorials of private infamy and public disaster.

CHAPTER XLVII

A FETTERED AMBASSADOR

Ὥστε τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανερούς ἐν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ Πραιτωρίῳ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς πᾶσι. — Ep. S. Paul. ad Phil. i. 13.

THERE was one spot in Rome which was calm amid all tumults, happy amid all calamities, though it was the last place where any of the Roman world would have deemed it possible for happiness to dwell. It was the narrow room which served as a prison to Paul of Tarsus.

As long as Burrus was Præfect of the Prætorians the prisoner's lot had been made as easy as the strictness of Roman discipline allowed. He had been allowed to hire a lodging of his own, and no hindrance was placed on the visits or kindly offices of his friends. He was, indeed, compelled to submit to the one intolerable condition of being fastened night and day by a coupling-chain to the wrist of a Roman soldier; but Julius and others had spoken to Burrus about him in such warm terms that, as in the case of Agrippa I., care was taken that he should be consigned to the charge of a kind centurion, and that the Prætorians to whom in turn he was chained should, as far as possible, be good-tempered and reasonable men.

There was no service which the soldiers more hated than this of guarding prisoners. Each soldier was for the time as much a prisoner as the prisoner to whom he was chained. To be chained to a Jew was regarded by most of the Prætorians as an intolerable humiliation. If indeed the Jew happened to be a handsome and cosmopolitan young prince like Agrippa, the duty had its alleviations; but at the present time the soldiers had in charge some Jewish priests sent to Rome by Festus, who shuddered to be brought into contact with them. To be chained to these haughty hierarchs, who did not conceal their disdain for their gentile guards, was a

cause of incessant annoyance, and there was not a Prætorian who did not groan when it was rumoured that Julius had consigned to them another Jew, of weak bodily presence, and with health enfeebled by toil and hardship.

But the soldiers to whose lot it first fell to be coupled to the new prisoner soon spread a favourable report of him. They told their comrades that though he was not only a Jew, but a *Christian*, he was yet so sweetly reasonable, so generously considerate, so anxious to alleviate the necessary tedium of their duty, that it was a pleasure, and not a misery, to take a turn in guarding him. Unlike the priests, he seemed to take a human interest in everything human. He would talk freely with them on gentile subjects. He listened earnestly to all they had to tell him of Rome, its daily incidents and accidents, its senatorial debates, its foreign campaigns, the edicts of the Emperor, and the fortunes of the imperial family. It was whispered that everything which he did and said was worthy and noble, and the centurions observed a marked change for the better in some of the men who had been brought into contact with him. The Jews, it was noticed, looked on him with hatred as a renegade, and even of the Jewish Christians there were few who visited him. But some Christian was almost always with him, and these friends of his, particularly the modest and engaging Timotheus, deepened the favourable impression which the prisoner himself had made.

In truth, this was not the least happy period of Paul's career. He was freed from the fret of endless anxiety and embittered opposition; he was no longer harassed by the multiform and terrible perils by which for so many years his life had been assailed. To many the forced cessation of the great work of their careers would have seemed an intolerable trial, and faith would have been weakened by the semblance of God's desertion. It was not so with Paul. He knew that he was where God meant him to be, and that he was still an ambassador, though, as he playfully said to his friends, an ambassador in a coupling-chain.

He ought in justice to have been brought to speedy trial, seeing that he had already been imprisoned for two years at Cæsarea on a charge wholly without foundation. But in his shipwreck the documents sent by Felix and Festus had been

lost, and when fresh documents came Nero's capricious idleness put off the trial from month to month. So Paul continued in prison, and became a missionary to the Prætorium, and to many Romans. His imprisonment was not lacking in elements of interest. Linus and many of the Roman Christians sought his lodging, and showed him every mark of affection. Luke was constantly with him, consulted with him about every detail of his Gospel, and took charge of his health. He was in frequent correspondence with his friends and with the converts of the churches which he had founded. Timotheus, who was the child of his heart, treated him with all the tenderness of a son. Tychicus and Epaphras came from Asia, and brought him news of the Church of Ephesus and of the valleys of the Lycus. Mark, the cousin of his first companion, Barnabas, came to cheer him with news of Peter and of Jerusalem, and of his travels in many lands. Epaphroditus ministered to his necessities by bringing him a gift from his beloved and generous Philippians. The soldiers heard the letters which he dictated to his converts, and heard what Luke read to him of his Gospel. Many of them were deeply influenced by the new world of thought and holiness which was thus revealed to them. Some were converted and baptised, and found that the lodging of the Jewish prisoner was to them the vestibule of the house of God.

And when the soldier on guard was a brother, the intercourse which the prisoner could hold with any who came to visit him was unconstrained. Most of all was this the case when the Prætorian Celsus was chained to him, and the veteran soldier was so happy in the charge that he was ready to relieve any Prætorian by taking his turn in addition to his own. It was the armour of Celsus, as it lay beside him on the floor, dinted with the blows of many a battle, which suggested to Paul his beautiful description of the Christian panoply.

One day there came to the Apostle a lady deeply veiled attended by a Christian freedwoman. She was so agitated that, when she had sunk on one of the humble seats, she could scarcely find words in which to pour forth her anguish. When she grew a little calmer, she lifted her veil, and Celsus rose and made her a respectful salutation, for he recognised the mourning robes and sad but beautiful face of the wife of Aulus Plautius.

'The Lady Pomponia,' he said, 'may speak freely, and fear not. I will unloose the coupling-chain, and go into the outer room.'

Pomponia thanked him, and told the Apostle that she had long been a baptised sister, and had read his letters to Rome and other churches, and had now come to him for consolation in unutterable distress of heart. She had but one son — the young and beautiful Aulus, the heir and the hope of their great house. But Nero had begun to hate her husband and herself, and was jealous lest some day the army should prefer the Conqueror of Britain to the tenth-rate actor and singer. For Agrippina, in one of her fits of rage, had, before her death, unwisely and unkindly mentioned the youthful Aulus as a virtuous boy who might one day wear the purple more worthily than Nero, who disgraced it; and Nero, wounded in his vanity, had determined on revenge. With a wicked cruelty which would have been infamous even in a Tiberius or a Caligula, he had invited the boy to the Palace, had subjected him to the deadliest insults, and had then ordered him to be slain, accompanying the order with a brutal jest against his mother Agrippina. And the people knew of the crime, and hardly did more than laugh and shrug their shoulders; and the Senate knew of the crime, and did not cease for a single day from its adulation to the tyrant; and the army knew of the crime, and not one sword flashed from its scabbard; and the philosophers and the poets knew of the crime, and not one denunciation scathed that deed of hell.

Pomponia's heart was broken. Did God deal thus with His servants? Was the Christ far away in His blue heaven, and heeded not these things? And was it not lawful, was it not a duty, for Christians to help to sweep away from the earth such a monster of iniquity? Might she not rouse her husband, Aulus Plautius — not to avenge the individual wrong which was breaking his heart, and bringing him down to the gates of the grave — but to rid mankind from the incubus of an intolerable curse?

The Apostle saw that his task was difficult. For a moment he bowed his head, and clasped his hands in prayer. He needed threefold wisdom — to console the mother's anguish; to avert the thought of vengeance; to strengthen the faith which had been assailed by sore perplexity. And the grace

came to him. He banished from Pomponia's heart the dread that because her Aulus had died unbaptised, he was doomed to perish: he told her not to dream that the boy, who had thus gone home, had departed unloved by his Heavenly Father. Fearful times were coming on the earth, and her beloved son, in whom the signs of virtue had not been wanting, might have been taken only to save him from the furnace of moral temptation and the wrath to come. Then taking from the hand of Luke the scroll in which he had been writing the great discourse on the Mount of Olives, he read to her the words of Jesus: 'Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake. And yet a hair from your head shall not perish. In your endurance ye shall acquire your souls.'

'Alas!' she cried, 'how may I interpret this promise that a hair of our heads shall not fall, when my very heart is cleft in twain?'

He answered that the Lord spake not of earthly things. He warned us that in the world we should have tribulation; but He has overcome the world. And he prayed her not to dream of hastening the tyrant's punishment. 'Leave him in God's hands. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."'

When his voice ceased, the passion of Pomponia's grief had sunk to rest. The tears which still coursed down her cheeks were but the natural tears of a mother's bereavement. Her beautiful soul was prepared for consolation, and her faith had but bowed for a moment like the upper foliage of a tree under the stress of some mighty storm. To calm her yet further, the Beloved Physician began to read aloud a passage here and there from the Evangel which occupied his daily thoughts. He read of the love of Jesus for children; he read the beatitudes; he read the story of the Cross. The music of the words and thoughts, borne on the music of his sweet and solemn voice, sank into Pomponia's soul. She thanked the Evangelist, and, asking for the blessing of the Apostle, dropped her veil and departed to her desolate home.

The Heavenly Father who had suffered anguish to fall upon her had also sent medicine and a physician of the soul to heal her sickness. When she reached her palace on the Aventine, she was able to devote her whole strength to save her husband from succumbing to a sorrow which for him was beyond the reach of consolation. He had chosen for the epitaph of his

boy's tomb the defiant words, 'I Aulus, the son of Aulus Plautius, uplift my hands against the gods, who took me hence in my innocence, at the age of fifteen years.' [1] But she dissuaded him. 'Why complain,' she said, 'against the decree of Heaven? It may be good, and even the best, did we but know it. Nay, my Aulus, carve rather on his tomb a green leaf, and the two words, "In peace," and add, if thou wilt, the line of Euripides,

'"Who knows if life be death, and death be life?"'

[1] A real pagan epitaph.

CHAPTER XLVIII

ENSLAVED AND FREE

'These rags, this grinding, is not yet so base
As was my former servitude, ignoble
Unmanly, ignominious, infamous,
True slavery.'

Samson Agonistes.

Pomponia Græcina was only one of many to whom Paul of Tarsus from his prison-lodging brought joy and consolation. There was a twofold element in the happiness which seems to rise to exultation in the letter which he wrote from Rome to his Philippians. On the one hand he felt that from his bonds there streamed illumination, so that the grace of Christ became manifest even in Cæsar's household, and among his chosen soldiers; and, on the other, he was enabled to hear the groanings of them who were in a captivity far sorer than his own — to undo many a heavy burden, and let the oppressed go free.

Shortly after the visit he had received from Pomponia, he was told that a young man was waiting outside who desired to speak with him. His sympathy with the young in their trials and temptations was always deep, and he asked Luke to admit the visitor. With hesitating step and downcast mien he entered, and the Apostle bade him come and sit by his side.

'Dost thou recognise me?' asked the visitor, in a low voice.

'I have met many youths in many cities,' answered the Apostle, 'and I have seen thy face before, but where I cannot remember. Art thou Eutychus of Troas?'

'No,' he answered, glancing at the Prætorian; 'but,' he added in a whisper, 'I am, or rather I was, a Christian.'

'Speak without fear,' said Celsus; 'I, too, am one of the brethren.'

'Thou wilt soon remember me,' said the youth to Paul, removing the disguise which covered his dark locks and greatly altered his appearance. 'I saw thee in the school of Tyrannus at Ephesus, when I came there with my master, Philemon of Colossæ.'

'Onesimus!' said the Apostle. 'Welcome, my son — though I have heard sad things of thee from many.'

'It is true, it is all true, that thou hast heard of me, O my father!' said Onesimus, as he knelt before the Apostle, and kissed the hand on which his tears were falling fast. 'Yes; I stole money from Philemon, my beloved master. I ran away from him; I am a worthless fugitive, a thievish Phrygian slave, whom most masters would crucify. And worse — I have denied the faith; I have done all things vile. Can there be forgiveness, can there be hope, for such as I am?'

'My son,' said the Apostle, 'there is forgiveness, there is hope, for all who seek it.'

'But oh, thou knowest not, my father, to what depths I have sunk. I have stolen a second time. I have been drunken with the drunken, slothful with the slothful, unclean with the unclean. I have been false to my trust. I have been in the slaves' prison, and the gladiators' school. I have fought in the amphitheatre. I have served the shameful wandering priests of the Syrian goddess. Twice over have I been all but a murderer. Can all this be forgiven?'

'My son,' said Paul, deeply touched, 'thou hast sinned deeply; but so have many, who now are washed, cleansed, justified, sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in the Spirit of our God.'

'Ah, but,' cried the youth, 'they have never been renegades.'

'Onesimus,' answered Paul, 'hast thou not heard how the Lord Jesus told us to forgive our brethren, not only seven times, but seventy times seven? Will He be less merciful than He has bidden us to be? I bid thee hope in His infinite forgiveness. The blind and the leper, the publican and the harlot, the impotent man, and she out of whom he cast seven devils, went to Him, and were forgiven. Go thou, if thou canst not otherwise, as a leper, as a demoniac, as a

paralytic, and He will abundantly pardon. Hast thou, indeed, sought Him?'

'Nay, father, I could not,' said Onesimus. 'Ever since that theft from Philemon, ever since that flight, I have prayed but faintly; I felt as if I could not pray, as if no prayer of mine could be heard. A cloud of despair has hidden God's face from me. Oh!' he cried, wringing his hands, 'I am an outcast — I am a castaway. I have no part in Him. My lot is now with this world, of which I have seen the infamies and loathe the crimes. It was but two weeks ago that any gleam of hope came back to me.'

'What gave thee hope?'

'Lucas of Antioch, whom I see with thee, gave some parts of his records of Jesus to one of Octavia's slaves. I, too, went with the unhappy Empress to Pandataria, and there I read the Master's parable of the Prodigal Son, and I tried to say, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say —"'

But here Onesimus stopped, and though he made an effort, he was unable to proceed.

With all his heart the great Apostle pitied him; indeed he pitied him so much that he found no words to speak. He could only lay his hand gently on the suppliant's head, and uplift his eyes to heaven in prayer.

So Luke spoke and said, 'I can tell thee, Onesimus, of other words of the Master. He cried: "Come unto me, all that are weary and heavy-laden, and I will refresh you;" and "him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out."'

'Did He say that? Did He say that?' asked Onesimus, eagerly.

'He did,' said Luke, 'and no word of His can pass away.'

The Prætorian Celsus had heard the conversation, and he too was touched. 'Those words,' he said, 'called me from Satan to God. I was as deep a sinner as any man in the cohort, and no man can be much worse than that. I used to shrink from no cruelty, and to abstain from no sin. I was one of the soldiers employed in the massacre of the innocent slaves of Pedanius Secundus. So deep was my misery that one night I went in full armour to the Sublician Bridge, meaning to end a life so shamed and empty. But as I climbed the parapet, I was seized by the strong arm of a man in a slave's dress. I drew my dagger and asked him,

with a savage oath, if he held his life cheap, since he, a slave, thus dared to interfere with me, a Prætorian soldier. He fixed his steady eyes on me, and said, "I am unarmed; you can slay me if you will; but I will try to prevent you from self-murder." "My life is my own," I answered sullenly. "It is not your own," he answered. "It is God's, who gave it. He set you here, and you have no right to desert your post." The man was Nereus, now the freedman of Pudens. He drew me away from the bridge, and I talked long with him. He was the first to give me the hope that I might live for better things. He taught me about Christ, and Christ's promise that He would cast out none who came to Him. That saved me. When I was a Pagan I knew shame and guilt, but never knew that it could be washed away.'

'Thanks be to God for His great goodness,' said the Apostle. 'And thou, my son, Onesimus, hear what Celsus has said. Thou hast had no fruit in the things of which thou art now ashamed, for the end of those things is death. But now, if thou wilt return to Christ, thy fruit shall be to holiness, and the end shall be eternal life.'

That interview completed the change in the heart of the Phrygian youth. He had returned from Pandataria a freedman, for on the night before her murder Octavia had freed her Christian slaves. He had also received gifts from his generous mistress which placed him above present need. He had therefore hired himself a lodging, and now, being readmitted, at Paul's intercession, into the Christian assemblies, he recovered life and happiness. He waited on the Apostle with ceaseless assiduity, and anticipated all his wants. If ever Paul needed one to serve him — which was often the case, for Timotheus had been sent on a message to Ephesus — the Phrygian was at hand, and the Apostle found in his society and cheerful vivacity a great alleviation of a captive's weariness. It was not long before he confided to the Apostle his whole story, concealing nothing, and he asked for his advice as to his future course.

That advice fell like a death-blow on all his hopes. With the impetuosity of youth he had entirely lost sight of the fact that he was still Philemon's slave, and that the manumission conferred on him by Octavia, in her ignorance that he was the personal chattel of another, was legally in-

valid. He was, therefore, stricken with amazement when the Apostle told him that he was not a freedman, but still a slave. At those words the fabric of his life seemed once more to be smitten into ruins. He had exulted with passionate joy at the thought that he was no longer at the beck and call of a master, no longer liable to the horrors of the cross and the branding-iron, of the scourge or the furca. To be told that he was still a Phrygian slave, that duty required him to go back to the *familia* of Philemon, to restore what he had stolen, to face any punishment which the law of Colossæ might inflict on him, to place his future life unreservedly in the hands of his owner, and to face the humiliation of returning to the company of his old companions as a thief and a runaway — this was like a sentence of hopeless condemnation. And there was yet another circumstance which made the pang more deadly. He still cherished for the gentle daughter of Nereus a love which might not have seemed hopeless. If he stayed at Rome, if as a freedman he could strike out for himself an honourable career — which his Greek education rendered possible — he felt sure that he could yet win the hand of the Christian girl. But to return to Colossæ as a slave, and a guilty slave, and to be perhaps compelled to grow old in servitude on the banks of the Lycus — it seemed too terrible a sacrifice!

Yet his sincerity stood the test. After a great struggle with himself he bowed his head, and answered: 'If it is my duty, my father, I will do it.'

'It is thy duty, my son Onesimus, and doubt not that the path of thy duty will also be the path of thy happiness. Thou wilt gain by losing. I know and I love Philemon, and his wife Apphia, and their son Archippus; and I will write to Philemon for thee, and I do not doubt that now he will set thee free — for indeed I need thee. Thou art as a son to me; I have begotten thee in my bonds, and thou art true to thy name in all thy help to me. But even if Philemon does not set thee free, he is now thy fellow-Christian, and therefore thy brother beloved, and no slavery can make thee other than the Lord's freedman.'

The letter to Philemon was written — the Magna Charta of ultimate emancipation — and Onesimus was sent with it to his former master. He was accompanied by Tychicus of

Ephesus, who was charged with the circular letter to that and other cities, as well as with the letter to the Colossians. They had an affecting parting with the Apostle, for though he was full of hope, yet the issue of his approaching trial was uncertain, and they knew not whether they should ever see his face again. He shed tears as he embraced Onesimus, to whom he had grown deeply attached, but they left him in the kind care of Aristarchus, and of the two Evangelists Mark and Luke. Above all, Timotheus had again come from Ephesus to stay with him, and Timotheus was to him as the son of his old age.

His case excited little attention. When it was heard in Nero's presence the Emperor was amusing himself with composing a loose satire, paragraphs of which he handed from time to time to some delighted favourite. He polished his wicked verses again and again, till his note-book was almost illegible with erasures, and he paid little heed to the Apostle's accusers. The evidence, scanty as it was, broke down completely, and testimony in favour of the innocence and the services of the prisoner was given gladly by gentile witnesses.

The impeachment might have been more formidable but for the shipwreck of the vessel which, as Julius had told Vespasian, was conveying to Rome a commission of his accusers among whom were two persons no less important than Josephus, the young and learned Rabbi of Jerusalem, and Ishmael ben Phabi,[1] the High Priest. But their ship foundered in a terrible storm. Its entire cargo was lost, including the documents on which the Sadducean hierarchs of Jerusalem had relied to procure the Apostle's condemnation. Of the two hundred souls on board only eighty had been picked up, by a ship of Cyrene, after they had swum or floated all night in the tempestuous waves. Ishmael and Josephus had indeed been saved, but several of their witnesses had perished. On the other hand, when men so different as Felix the brother of Pallas, and the honourable Festus, and the centurion Julius, and Publius the Protos of Melite, and Lysias the chief captain at Jerusalem, all wrote in Paul's favour, and when the good-natured King Agrippa II. and Berenice had taken the trouble to subscribe to this favourable testimony with their own

[1] Note 42. — Ishmael ben Phabi.

hands, there could be no reason for detaining him. Not even Tigellinus had any object in keeping his clutch upon a prisoner who was too poor for purposes of extortion. The Apostle was acquitted. Accompanied by rejoicing friends, he went to Ostia, and thence set sail for Ephesus. After a brief sojourn in the city of Artemis, he paid his promised visit to Philemon at Colossæ. The first to greet him with happy smiles in the house of the Colossian gentleman was Onesimus, and as the Apostle pressed him to his heart, he learnt that all his hopes had been fulfilled. Philemon, on receiving Paul's letter, had summoned the fugitive to his presence, and frankly forgiven him. Orders were given to all the slaves of the household that no reference was to be made to the past. Apphia and Archippus treated the runaway with marked kindness, and he himself restored the full sum which he had stolen and strove in every way to repair the old wrong. Philemon had not thought it advisable, under the circumstances, at once to set Onesimus free, but now in honour of Paul's visit he manumitted him and others of his Christian slaves, and allowed him henceforth to devote his grateful services to the comfort of the Apostle, with whom he set forth for Crete.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE DEPTHS OF SATAN

'He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,
And crowned his hair with flowers —
No easier nor no quicker passed
The impracticable hours.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

It became daily more difficult for Nero to stimulate the jaded pulse of appetites at once sated and insatiable; but in the year A. D. 64 a new and immense sensation broke the tedious monotony of a life cursed with the gratification of every desire. The influence of Poppæa grew irresistible when it became evident that she was about to make Nero a father. In due time she gave birth to a daughter, who seemed destined to continue the imperial line. Nero went wild with joy. The child was born in the villa at Antium, where he himself had first seen the light. The highest of all titles, that of Augusta, was immediately conferred not only upon Poppæa, but even on the unconscious infant. Public vows, which had already been undertaken for her safety, were paid and multiplied. Thanksgivings on the most superb scale were given to the gods. A temple was reared to the goddess Fecundity. Golden statues of the Antian goddesses of Fortune were placed on the throne of the Capitoline Jupiter. Coins were struck on which the baby was glorified under the names of Claudia Augusta. The entire Senate set forth in long procession from Rome to congratulate the Emperor and Empress. Nero seized the opportunity to indulge his hatred against Pætus Thrasea. When the other senators were received into his presence, he sent an order that Thrasea was not to be admitted. Every one understood the significance of the message. It was a presage of certain doom. But Thrasea received it with unmoved countenance, and set out on his return to Rome with undiminished cheerfulness. To a noble

and virtuous Roman all life was at that time the valley of the shadow of death.

The birth of Nero's child greatly strengthened his position as Emperor. While he remained childless there was the possibility that when he died, or was swept away, the Senate might be able to summon to the purple some worthier successor. That hope was now cut off. Seneca withdrew himself to the utmost from public notice. The fate of Pallas was an additional warning to him. The boundless extravagances of Nero were rapidly exhausting a treasure which would have sufficed for anything except a superhuman rapacity. The wealth of Pallas proved too strong a temptation for Nero. He had the freedman poisoned, and seized his ill-gotten gains. To avoid a similar fate, Seneca entreated the Emperor to accept all his possessions and to suffer him to retire. Nero received the request with hypocritical assurances. How, he asked, could Seneca possibly suspect a prince who was so deeply indebted to his care? But, though Nero refused to accept either his resignation or his property, the philosopher did not deceive himself. He shut himself up in a seclusion into which he suffered none but his most intimate friends to intrude. He found his sole relief in writing to his friend Lucilius letters which were meant to console those who were living like himself under the daily pressure of agonising anticipations.

But the extravagant joy of Nero was rudely quenched. Before four months had ended the infant Claudia Augusta died, and Nero was plunged in a grief as extravagant as had been his delight. The birth of his child was to him a proof that the gods had averted their wrath, by omens of which he was frequently terrified. To train youths for the Neronian games, he had built a gymnasium, in which was placed a bronze statue of himself. The gymnasium had been struck by lightning, and the statue had been fused and disfigured into a mass of shapeless metal. The omen was horrific, and was followed by the news that the bright and wanton little cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum had been shaken almost into ruins by an earthquake of unusual severity. The safe birth of a child had alleviated the haunting fears which these events had excited in his mind; but they returned when the little Claudia died, nor were they greatly eased by making

her a goddess, by striking coins with the inscription '*Diva Claudia Neronis*,' and by appointing in her honour a pulvinar, a temple, and a priest!

Those who understood his needs and his character saw that life could only be made tolerable for him by excitements still more intense, and crimes still more colossal, than those to which he had grown accustomed. It had become his constant boast that the Emperor could do anything he chose, and that he had been the first Emperor to find out the fact. He therefore never hesitated to secure the death of any one whom he disliked. If they were insignificant persons, he had them poisoned and seized their goods. As no instinct of gratitude prevented him from thus murdering Pallas, who had been the chief agent in procuring his adoption and his succession to the Empire, he had the less hesitation in sacrificing others of less fame. Since Torquatus Silanus was the great-great-grandson of Augustus, he determined to get rid of him on charges of ostentation and seditious practices. When he had driven him to suicide he proclaimed that he had intended to forgive him. Against the Senate he cherished so deep a grudge that with his intimates he discussed the plan of putting all the members of the order to death and distributing its functions among the knights and freedmen. Cruelty had not been among his natural vices, but he now became athirst for blood.

But hatred could only be gratified by spasms of brief indulgence, and the animal passions also required something ever new to galvanise their decrepitude. No one understood this better than Tigellinus. Himself a voluptuary, who had exhausted the resources of every base pleasure, he sought to supply by effrontery the lack of new sensations. With this view he organised continuous revelries which should be unparalleled either for costly extravagance or for outrageous infamy.

Ruinous to the well-being of the State as were these portents of materialism, they were innocent in comparison with the deliberate corruption of public morals. Things are at their worst when vice is so hardened that, instead of seeking concealment, it courts notoriety. All Rome, even her ordinarily vicious population, recalled with shame the orgies, at once monstrous and vulgar, which were planned and paid for by Tigellinus to please his patron. Happily the world has never

seen or heard of an entertainment more abominable. In the centre of the Campus Martius, near the Pantheon, was the Lake of Agrippa, surrounded by a park full of groves, gardens, and shrines. On the lake Tigellinus had constructed a raft for the guests. The gondolas moored by the margin to convey the banqueters to the raft were decorated with gilding, and vermilion, and silken streamers, and rowed by boy-slaves from Britain, Greece, and Asia, with long curled hair and bracelets of gold on their bare arms and ankles. On the raft were erected pavilions, filled with delicacies, and furnished as luxuriously as the tents of Eastern kings. When the actual feasting was over the whole of the gardens were filled with choirs of musicians, and all the varletry of either sex that could be assembled from the confines of Rome. Not one honest or honourable person was invited. It was to be a banquet of reprobates. Slaves, and gladiators, and nobles, and women of consular families, and soldiers, and men who had held high offices, and the gilded youth of Roman effeminacy, and Greeklings skilled in all refinements of evil, roamed promiscuously under the light of numberless cressets, their heads crowned with roses, their hearts inflamed with wine. It was a chaos of abomination, such as would not have been possible in any other age than the first century after Christ, or in any other place than imperial Rome. No Christian pen can paint that revelry of Antichrist, or do more than distantly allude to the scenes which followed, when Nero, disguised in the skin of a bear, crawled on all fours among the vilest of those wretches, and gave to him 'who saw the Apocalypse' the image of the wild beast who sprang from the foul scum of the world's most turbid sea.

Yet though there was no truce to such scenes of darkness, except such as was imposed by the premature paralysis of excess, they were insufficient to occupy Nero's tedium, or fill to the brim the cup of his desires. To be an actor, to be a public singer — that seemed to him to be the culmination of earthly bliss. Nothing would satisfy his burning caprice but to appear before the multitude as Paris and Aliturus did. But he dared not as yet insult the majesty of Rome with the spectacle of a stage Augustus, and therefore determined to sing first before an enchanted provincial audience, and thence to proceed to Greece, not displaying himself in the theatre of the

capital till he could return as a victor in the Olympic and Pythian games. But when he had got as far as Beneventum he changed his mind, and determined to visit Egypt and the Eastern provinces instead of Greece. In Egypt he meant to re-enact with unheard-of splendour the old revelries of Antony and Cleopatra, and thought that in the hot, luxurious valley of the Nile he might hear of new forms of pleasure and luxury. Magnificent preparations were set on foot for his reception, and his foster-brother, Cæcina Tuscus, was sent to superintend them. Tuscus ventured to bathe in a sumptuous bath constructed for Nero's use, and for this harmless act Nero sentenced him to exile. But the visit to Egypt was never paid. On his return to the Palace, he entered the Temple of Vesta, beside the Forum. Whether he was suddenly smitten with superstitious dread from the recollection of his crimes or from some other cause, he was there seized with a violent fit of shivering. His conscience smote him, not for other enormities, but for a crime which, in mere wanton wickedness, he had committed against the majesty of Vesta and the most sacred beliefs of Rome. In defiance of every law, human and divine, he had recently seized Rubria, one of the vestal virgins. It had become one of the horrible characteristics of his mind that half the fascination of wickedness consisted for him in the scandal which it caused. His rank elevated him above human vengeance, but in that circular shrine, and in presence of the ever-burning fire, he felt as if he were in the power of the goddess, and swooned away. The omen frightened him. Pretending that he could not endure to see his people saddened by the thought of his absence, he abandoned his journey, and announced that he would not leave them.

What new thing could be devised to dispel his weariness? He passionately longed for some tremendous sensation to dissipate his lassitude. If the hours had passed with leaden pace when he first tasted the sweets of autocracy, how unutterably weary had they now become!

'Tigellinus, cannot you invent for me some new excitement?' he asked. 'I shall commit suicide from sheer fatigue. Tiberius went to Capri, but a rock like that would not suit me. I cannot live in the vulgar respectability of an Augustus or a Claudius.'

'Shall I give you another feast like that at the Lake of Agrippa?'

'That was all very well,' said Nero, 'but things grow tedious by repetition. Petronius used to be suggestive, but even he has long ago exhausted his inventiveness.'

'I never knew why you gave up going to Greece,' said the Præfect.

'I thought it better to put it off till my voice was still more perfect. But what am I to do now? I am dying for a new experience. Of what use is life except to concentrate its essence into thrilling sensations?'

'Was it not a new sensation, Cæsar, when the elephant walked on the tight rope with the knight Julius Drusus on his back?'

'It amused me for once,' said Nero. 'It would be stale a second time.'

'Well, then, when you had the "Conflagration" of Afranius put on the stage, and let the actors pillage the burning house?'

'Aye,' said Nero, 'that was worth seeing. It gave me a hint or two for my poem on the "Taking of Troy." What might not art gain, and how might not my poem be enriched, if I had an actual scene to draw from!'

'You would hardly like to see Rome in flames, Cæsar?'

'Indeed I should. It would be worth living for. Happy Priam, who *saw* the Burning of Troy, about which I can only *write*.

'But Rome is something different from Troy,' said Tigellinus.

'Rome!' answered the Emperor. 'I am sick of it. Look at these close, narrow, crowded streets. I should like to see a city of broad streets, and palaces, and gardens, like Thebes, or Memphis, or Babylon. Ninus and Sardanapalus had cities worth living in.'

Their conversation was held in a spacious room of the *Domus Transitoria*, with which Nero had filled up the whole space from the Palatine to the Esquiline.

'Does not this Palace suffice you?' asked the Præfect.

'Not at all,' replied Nero. 'Many of the neighboring houses and temples are in my way, and I should like to clear them off, and give myself air to breathe.'

'Are you serious, Cæsar?'

'Of course I am,' he answered, petulantly.

Tigellinus shrugged his shoulders, and quoted a line from the Bellerophon of Euripides:—

'When I am dead, let earth be rolled in flame.'

'Nay, while I *live* let earth be rolled in flame,' answered the Emperor, altering the iambic. 'Anything would be better than to smoulder to death for want of something to amuse me.'

Nero was *not* altogether in earnest. His conversation was habitually grandiose, because he fed a perverse imagination with phantasmagorias and monstrosities. He was suffering from that blood-poisoning of unchecked vice which has so often maddened Eastern despots.

The fixed idea of watching a conflagration, and getting illustrations for his Trojan epic, often returned to this Emperor of melodrama. Without resolutely entertaining the purpose of wrapping Rome in flames, he allowed himself to hint at it and to play with it. But he had made Tigellinus much more in earnest than himself. That evil genius of the Emperor thought that from such a calamity he at least would have nothing to lose, and might have everything to gain. He had inexhaustible riches at his disposal, and numberless wretches in his pay. He meant to see what could be done. Not long after the above conversation Nero went for a few days of literary leisure and musical practice to his villa at Antium, and Tigellinus gave him hints that at Antium he might expect startling news, and that a first-rate sensation was in store for him. For the magnitude and horror of that sensation even Nero was not prepared.

To us it all seems incredible. It did not seem incredible to Tacitus, and it is positively affirmed by Suetonius, Dion Cassius, and even by the grave and learned Pliny the Elder, who, as a contemporary, must have known infinitely better than we can do 'the depths to which despotism in delirium can descend.'

CHAPTER L

A CITY IN FLAMES

'Hoc incendium e turri Mæcenatiana prospectans, lætusque *flammæ*, ut aiebat, *pulchritudine*, ἅλωσιν Ilii in illo suo scenico habitu decantavit.'—SUET. *Nero*, 38.

Ἔκραζον ὁρῶντες τὸν καπνὸν τῆς πυρώσεως αὐτῆς — Apoc. xviii. 9.

NERO set out for Antium on July 17. Two days afterwards Rome was in a sea of surging flame. Men noticed that it was the anniversary of the day on which, four and a half centuries earlier, the city had been burnt by the Gauls. The fire had burst forth in the neighbourhood of the Circus Maximus. The shops and storehouses which surrounded that huge structure were full of combustible materials, including the machinery and properties used in the public spectacles. Here the flames seized a secure hold, and, raging about the Cœlian, rolled toward the eastern front of the Palatine. Checked by the steep sides of the hill and its cyclopean architecture, the fire swept down the valleys on either side — to the right, along the Via Nova; to the left, along the Triumphal Way. It ravaged the Velabrum and the Forum; it consumed the temple and altar reared to Hercules by the Arcadian Evander, the palace of Numa, and the circular Temple of Vesta, which enshrined the ever-burning hearth and Penates of the Roman people. Sweeping into the Carinæ, which was crowded by consular palaces, it devoured those stately structures, and the many trophies of ancient victories with which they were enriched. On the Aventine it destroyed the temple which Servius Tullius had erected to the Moon, and in it the priceless relics of Greek art which L. Mummius had brought from Corinth. Rolling back to the Palatine with more victorious violence, it reduced to a blackened ruin the venerable temple which Romulus had vowed to Jupiter Stator. Then, licking up everything which lay in its path, it rioted with voluptuous fury in the more densely

crowded regions of the city, raging and crackling among the old, tortuous purlieus and crazy habitations of the Subura. With its hot breath it purged the slums and rookeries, foul with a pauper population of Oriental immigrants, who were massed round the ill-famed shrines of Isis and Serapis. When it had acquired irresistible volume in these lower regions, it again rushed up the hills as with the rage of a demon, to sweep down once more in tumultuous billows over the helpless levels. For six days and seven nights it maintained its horrible and splendid triumph — now bounding from street to street with prodigious rapidity, now seeming to linger luxuriously in some crowded district, flinging up to heaven great sheets of flame, and turning the nightly sky into a vault of suffocating crimson.

No words can paint the horror of a scene which transformed into a Gehenna of destruction a city enriched with the magnificence of nearly eight centuries of victory. There were districts in which the heat was so intense that they were unapproachable, and the rarefaction of the atmosphere, joined to a strong breeze which seemed in league with the destroying element, filled the air with a roar as of ten thousand wild beasts. Here stores of resinous material made the consuming flames white with intensity; and there the burning and smouldering *débris*, which for a time half choked the conflagration, poured forth black volumes of smoke, which hid its progress under a pall of midnight. Here an *insula*, many stories high, collapsed with a crash which was heard for miles; and there whole streets, falling simultaneously on both sides, caused continuous bursts of sound like the long roll of incessant thunder.

But the physical horrors of the scene, as it was witnessed by a million or more spectators who thronged from every town of Latium and Campania to behold it, were nothing compared with the prodigies of human agony and the multiform images of death and crime. At first there had been wild efforts on the part of many to save their homes. But their efforts were rendered futile by many causes. The conflagration seemed to break forth, not in one spot, but from various quarters, which rolled together their concurrent seas of flame. No means were adequate to resist a foe which seemed to be ubiquitous. The scorching heat drove back the

boldest firemen. The buckets, from which the police derived their nickname of *sparteoli*, were ludicrously inadequate for an emergency so tremendous. The supplies of water were not available in the wild confusion. It was rumoured on every side that slaves and agents of the imperial household were seen with tow and torches in their hands, which they flung into the houses of the nobles; and, if any attempted to check them, they menacingly declared that they had authority for their doings. If a senator tried to organise his slaves to quench the flames or impede their advance, he was bidden to take care what he was about. Burglary and rapine were let loose. The criminal population of the city seized the opportunity to plunder every burning palace into which they could force their way. Nor was it long before self-preservation became the one absorbing passion of the multitude, surprised by the ever-swelling dimensions of the catastrophe. Here a group of women, as they stood shrieking and tearing their hair, unwilling to leave their homes or unable to save their little ones, were trampled down under the hurrying rush of some group of fugitives. Here the father of a family, hindered in his flight by the helplessness of age or childhood, found himself swept along by reckless pillagers, and with unutterable anguish was compelled to abandon some little child or decrepit grandsire who had been flung down on the pavement with bruised or broken limbs. As the inhabitants of regions which the fire had freshly invaded rushed to escape, they plunged into winding alleys overarched by meeting flames, or their flight was impeded by smouldering ruins, or they were overwhelmed by the thunderous fall of some huge building, many, losing their heads altogether, stood stupefied with despair, and the smoke stifled them, or the fire scorched them, until the streets were filled with charred corpses. Others in raging defiance, seeing themselves reduced to penury by the loss of all they possessed, or with hearts lacerated by the death of their beloved, leapt madly into the flames. Rome during all that week was a pandemonium of horror, in which, amid shrieks and yells and every sound of ruin, were witnessed the wrath of the elements, the passions of devils, and tragedies of despair, and anguish which no heart can conceive, no tongue describe.

At the first news that Rome was in flames, and that they

were already approaching his Domus Transitoria, Nero hurried back from Antium. Now indeed he had a sensation to his heart's content. At first he was shocked by the magnitude of a catastrophe more overwhelming than had ever before happened to Rome or any other city. He mounted the tower of Mæcenas, and gazed for hours upon the scene — thrilling with excitement which was not without its delicious elements. Safe himself, he was looking down on a storm of tempestous agony, which he could regard in the light of a spectacle. He was accustomed to gaze unmoved on human pangs in the bloody realism of the amphitheatre, and to see slave after slave flung to the lions, with their arms bound in chains concealed with flowers. But what scene of the circus, when the gilded chariots were reduced to a crashing wreck of collisions, in which the horses kicked one another and their charioteers to death — what gladiatorial massacre, filling the air with the reek of blood, was for a moment comparable to the sight of Rome in flames? The sublime horror of the moment stimulated in him all the genius of melodrama and artificial epic. Surrounded by his parasites, he compared Rome, now to a virgin whom the tigers of flame devoured, now to a gladiator wrestling with troops of lions in the arena. He was lost in admiration of the *beauty* of the fire. Now he called it a splendid rose, with petals of crimson; now a diadem of flaming and radiating gold; now again an enormous hydra with smoky pinions and tongue of flickering gleam. He wrote many a quaint and fantastic phrase in the notebooks which were crowded with his much-lined commonplaces of poetic imagery! Here were the materials for many future poems before him. He could, for instance, write an Ode on Tartarus — its horrible spaces of silent anguish, its black vapours, its brazen gates, and iron pillars, its ghosts and demons gibbering and shrieking in the shade, its torments and its Pyriphlegethon with cataracts of blood and fire. He felt sure that after these incitements of emotion and infusions of realism, his poem on the Burning of Troy would be immortal, since it could not fail to catch from such a scene a tinge of voluptuous sublimity!

And as he gazed for hours together of the day and of the night, he endeavoured to realise the aspect of the spectacle, and did not allow himself to be disturbed by the multitu-

dinous agonies which it implied. He did, indeed, accept some suggestions of Seneca, who, abandoning his seclusion from generous impulse, hurried to him as soon as it became evident that the fire meant wide-spread destitution. Nero felt a spasm of terror when the philosopher expressed a doubt whether sullen misery might not flash up into rage, and cause a formidable rebellion. For want of houses, the people were huddling into tombs and catacombs. Nero, therefore, took the hint that he should offer the Campus Martius and the monuments of Agrippa — his porticoes, baths, gardens, and the Temple of Neptune — as a refuge for the shivering throngs whom the flames had driven from their homes. But, this done, he flattered himself that the public disaster would redound to his popularity; and as it never occurred to him that any one would suspect his complicity, he gave himself up once more to æsthetic enjoyment. He ordered masses of roses to be strewn around him on the summit of the tower; he twanged his harp as he thought of refrains and songs which he intended to write on the subject; and he meant that Troy should stand as a transparent symbol of Rome. When he was for a time tired of watching, he induced his minions to ask him for an opportunity of hearing once more his celestial voice; and putting on his tragic *syrmos*, appeared on a private stage, harp in hand, and affectedly chanted to them his insipid strophes and emasculate conceits.

But even these first-rate sensations became in time monotonous. He had seen as much as he wanted, and to his great delight the conflagration had destroyed the buildings near the Palace on which he had cast covetous eyes. When after a pause the fire, which had been checked on the seventh night, broke out a second time from the Æmilian estate of Tigellinus, and raged fitfully for three days more, he was tired of it. There was no object in suffering the whole of Rome to be destroyed. He assented to a proposition that masses of buildings should be pulled down on the Esquiline, in order that the progress of the flames might be checked. The expedient was successful. There was now time to note the extent of the devastation. Rome was divided into fourteen districts. Three of these were reduced to utter wreck and destruction. Seven more were in a condition of desperate ruin; four alone re-

mained untouched. The loss of antiquities, of venerable buildings rich in historic associations, of precious manuscripts, of priceless relics of the past, above all, of works of art,

> 'the hand of famed artificers
> In cedar, marble, ivory, or gold,'

was such as none could estimate. The rumour arose that Nero was about to rebuild the city with unparalleled magnificence and call it Neronia; but whatever gain might accrue to another generation from endless straight lines, 'vast monumental perspectives, and sumptuosities of parade,' those who regarded cities as something more than official masses of architectural monotony were wounded to the heart. No new Rome could ever make up to them for the loss of the old beloved city which sat dreaming on her seven hills among the glorious memories of the past.[1]

The name of Nero was on every lip, and it was blended with curses not loud but deep. As he wandered over the blackened areas, his lictors accompanying him, his head crowned with garlands and his thoughts full of magnificent schemes of reconstruction, he became aware that the blank walls of the ruins were already scribbled over with infamies with which his name was connected, and that scowling brows were bent upon him and looks of hatred mingled with terror. His proclamation that none were to approach the ruins of their own houses, since he would charge himself with the burial of the human remains and the clearance of the *débris,* was interpreted into a design to enrich himself with any objects of value, or uninjured works of art, which might be disemcumbered from the general destruction. He found it necessary to take measures to prevent the indignation of the multitude from finding vent in furious outbreak. Inviting aid from the senators, he started a sort of patriotic fund, which did not differ greatly from a forced loan. He threw open his gardens to the desolate paupers, who had no distant villas such as those in which the rich took refuge; he ordered the erection of multitudes of temporary huts; he decreed that the necessaries of subsistence should be imported with all haste from Ostia and the neighbouring municipalities, and he reduced the fixed price of corn to the lowest possible

[1] Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 152.

limit. Under ordinary circumstances such measures would have been welcomed with gratitude, as they were some years later in the reign of Titus. As it was, they were insufficient to remove the odium with which rumour surrounded his name. The public voice accused him of being the author of a misery which it was beyond his power to alleviate. It was all very well for him to lavish a liberality which cost him nothing, and came from national resources; but while he was still steeped to the lips in superhuman luxury, who could restore to that nation of ruined men their lost children and relatives, their lost homes and cherished possessions, their lost materials and opportunities for gaining an honourable livelihood? The story that he had harped and sung and poetised while the city was crashing into ruins had first been whispered as a secret, but was now familiar to every lip; and it filled all hearts with execration and contempt. The ruthless egotism of the Emperor seemed likely to cost him dear.

All that was left of religious feeling in the old Paganism was overwhelmed with a sense that the gods were wroth. There rose a clamour that expiations and purifications were necessary. But litanies, and vigils, and sacred banquets were in vain, and Rome presented the piteous scene of a starving and homeless populace who regarded the past with horror and the future with despair, having no hope, and without God in the world.

CHAPTER LI

AN INFERNAL SUGGESTION

'I, under fair pretence of friendly ends,
And well-placed words of glozing courtesy,
Baited with reasons not unplausible,
Wind me into the easy-hearted man,
And hug him into snares.'

MILTON, *Comus.*

NERO was harassed night and day by a new terror. The grand spectacle of Rome in flames, and the touches of local colouring, æsthetic and realistic, which it had enabled him to add to his poem on the Taking of Troy, would have been dearly purchased if they were to involve the forfeiture of his throne and life. Yet the sinister attitude of the people could not be mistaken, nor their menacing murmurs hushed. Tigellinus began to doubt whether the allegiance of the German guards and other foreign mercenaries as many of them were, would remain unshaken. They showed inclination to sympathise with the proletariat in their dangerous disaffection.

Except Tigellinus and Poppæa there was no one to whom the Emperor dared open his secrets. Both of them were closeted with him, but could suggest nothing to awaken him from the abject alarm into which he was sinking. It was evident that alike the people and the Senate held him responsible for the late conflagration, and it was impossible to detect the author of the rumours which had made his actions the common theme of Roman gossip. The only way to save himself from the hatred which threatened to destroy him, would be to divert the suspicion of the masses into some other channel. But whom could Nero accuse with any semblance of probability? Tigellinus was unscrupulous and Poppæa shrewd, but they knew not what to advise.

While they were thus consulting, a slave announced that Aliturus, the Jewish pantomimist, accompanied by the High

Priest of Jerusalem and a distinguished Rabbi, desired an audience.

'Aliturus is welcome,' said Nero; 'but I do not want to be troubled by his countrymen.'

'Give them an audience, Cæsar,' said Poppæa, who was secretly addicted to Judaism, and had even been admitted as a proselyte of the gate. 'Aliturus presented them to me at Puteoli. They are worth conciliating. This High Priest is so rich that his mother (I am told) once presented him with a tunic worth a hundred minæ, and he only deigned to wear it once. You know the prophecy of the astrologer, that you are to have an Oriental Empire, and perhaps to reign at Jerusalem.'

Nero consented, and Aliturus, who was always among his favourites, was ushered into his presence. The actor wore the ordinary dress of a wealthy Roman youth, but the two friends who accompanied him were in the costume of the East, with rich robes and silken turbans. The elder of the two was an old man, whose white beard flowed in waves over his breast, and whose sumptuous dress and haughty bearing accorded with the dignity, if not with the humility, of the High-Priesthood. The younger was a man not yet thirty years old, splendidly handsome and full of the genius of his race.

'Welcome, Aliturus,' said the Empress. 'Cæsar, this is the venerable Ishmael ben Phabi, High Priest of the Jews, on whose ephod has hung the twelve-gemmed oracle, and who has worn the golden robes; and this is Josephus of Jerusalem, son of the Priest Matthias, a Priest, a Rabbi, and a soldier.'

The High Priest and the Rabbi bowed almost to the ground, and kissed the hand which Nero extended to them as he asked them on what business they had come to consult him.

'Half of our task in Rome has failed,' said the High Priest. 'We came, commissioned by our nation to impeach Paulus of Tarsus, a ringleader of the Galileans, for a sedition which he stirred up in Jerusalem; but while our shipwreck detained us your clemency has acquitted the criminal. We came also to entreat the liberation of some of our priests who are here in prison, sent hither on frivolous charges by the Procurator Festus.'

'I will intercede for them,' said Poppæa. 'Those Procurators of Judæa constantly maltreat an innocent and venerable people.'

'The last Procurator is of your appointment, Poppæa,' said the Emperor. 'I only nominated Gessius Florus, because you are a friend of his wife Cleopatra.'

'And he is the worst of them all,' whispered Josephus to Aliturus. 'He takes bribes from the bandits. He impales Jews who are knights and Roman citizens, and he would not desist, though Berenice went before his tribunal barefooted and with dishevelled hair.'

'I have no doubt that Florus will be kinder than his predecessors,' said Poppæa. 'The others have stirred up against Rome the anger of the Jewish God.'

'Who is that?' asked Nero. 'Is it Moses?'

'Moses,' said Ishmael, 'was a great law-giver, to whom was granted more than human wisdom; but we worship not a mortal man. Our God is He who made heaven and earth.'

'Anchialus?' asked Nero.[1]

'Anchialus is some gentile scoff which I understand not,' said the High Priest, with dignity.

Nero whispered to Poppæa a line of Lucan's:—

'Judæa, votaress of a dubious God.'

'Suffer *me* to answer,' said Josephus; 'and as the Emperor is learned in Greek I will answer in the line of an oracle given by the Clarian Apollo himself:—

'"Deem that the God Supreme, the Lord of Lords, is IAO"'[2]

'And do you mean to say that this God of yours — Iaô, as you call him — can injure Rome?'

'He punishes all who insult His majesty,' answered the young Rabbi, 'and He blesses those that honour Him. Cæsar, in his wisdom, knows how Pompeius burst into our Holy of Holies, and found that we did not worship, as men lyingly said, the image of an ass, but that the shrine was dark and empty. But from that time forth, Pompeius was overwhelmed in that sea of ruin which flung him, a headless corpse, on the shore of Alexandria. Heliodorus, the treasurer of Seleucus

[1] Note 43.

[2] Φράζεο τὸν πάντων ὕπατον θεὸν ἔμμεν' ΙΑΩ.

Philopator, was scourged out of our Holiest by a vision of angels. But Alexander the Great bowed before our High Priest Iaddua, and God gave him unexampled victories. And Julius, your mighty ancestor, was dear to our race, and he prospered through our prayers.'

'Yea,' said the High Priest, 'and when the Cæsar Gaius would have profaned our Temple with a statue of himself, our God smote him with madness, and ere a year was over the dagger reached his heart.'

Nero had fits of superstition, and he listened with greedy ears. 'I thought,' he said, 'that you Jews hated all mankind except yourselves.'

'We hate them not,' answered Ishmael. 'On the contrary, we pray for all the seventy nations of mankind, and we offer daily sacrifices for their welfare. If those sacrifices ceased, the world would perish.'

'Listen, Cæsar, to the High Priest's words,' said Poppæa, 'and set these priests free.'

'What Poppæa asks is done,' said Nero. 'But,' he continued, turning to the Jews, 'is not your nation seditious and turbulent?'

'It is not,' answered Ishmael. 'We never stir unless we are wronged. We would fain sit in peace, each under his own vine and his own fig-tree. We offer sacrifices in our Temple for the Emperor's safety.'

'Nero must not confuse us with the Christians,' said Josephus, quietly. 'The Romans and Greeks have not yet learnt the difference between us; and all *their* crimes are set down to us.'

'The Christians?' said Nero. 'Who are they? I have heard of them as malefactors, the scum of the earth, but always thought they were a sect of Jews.'

'Forbid it Heaven!' said the High Priest, vehemently. 'They worship a crucified *mesîth*, who deceived the people. Some of them, I confess with anguish, are of our race, but far more are Gentiles.'

'But did not Claudius drive the Jews from Rome, because they were always rioting at the instigation of one Chrestus? Indeed, I thought they were called Chrestians.'

'They like to be called Chrestians,' said Josephus, 'as though they were *chrestoi*, or excellent. But Christos is the

Greek for "anointed," and they use it for our Hebrew Messiah. It was not the Jews who rioted in the days of Claudius, Emperor, but the sect of Christians. Their Christus was crucified, thirty years ago, by Pontius Pilatus. This Paulus of Tarsus is their chief man now.'

'Paulus?' said Nero. 'I vaguely remember his being tried and acquitted a month ago. He seemed to me a harmless sort of man. He spoke, as I remember, very eloquently. Agrippa, and Berenice, and Festus, and even Felix, spoke well of him.'

'They are the enemies of our race,' said the High Priest, 'and they deceive thee, O Emperor. It is this very Paulus who turns the world upside down, and not only preaches against our holy law, but forbids to pay tribute to Cæsar, and teaches men to worship Jesus as their king.'

'Do they dare to set up another king than Cæsar?' exclaimed Nero, hotly. 'This must be seen to.'

'I have heard of them,' said Poppæa. 'It is they, and not the Jews, who hate the whole human race.'

'I am sorry I let that Paulus go,' said Nero. 'Tigellinus, have you any complaints against these imprisoned priests?'

'None,' said Tigellinus; 'they cost nothing, for they live chiefly on olives and figs.'

'Then set them free this evening.'

'We thank Cæsar for his goodness,' said the High Priest, once more making a low obeisance; 'and we hope that he will deign to accept our present.'

The present was a golden box, in which were many vials of rose-tinted alabaster, full of the most precious balsam of Jericho, which filled the chamber with perfume as Josephus took it from an attendant slave and laid it at Nero's feet.

'This shall be for Poppæa,' said the Emperor, 'and on her behalf I will send you a purple hanging for your Temple. I hope you will ask Iaô to be propitious to me.'

They were ushered out, and no sooner had they left the room than Tigellinus rose, and impetuously exclaimed—'I have it! Those Jews have taught me the secret. Strange that it never occurred to me before.'

'What is the secret, Præfect?' asked Poppæa.

'The Christians! we must accuse *them* of being the incen-

diaries of Rome. Cæsar, dismiss your fears. The propitiated gods have found a victim, and the people will be satisfied.'

Nero's spirits instantly rose. 'Excellent!' he exclaimed; 'and thanks to that handsome Rabbi for the hint; but who will tell us something more about them?'

'Aliturus will,' said Poppæa. 'As an actor he moves constantly among the people.'

Aliturus had hardly left the Palace when he was summoned back to the imperial conclave, and asked to tell what he knew about the Christians. He retailed all the vile calumnies which were current in antiquity about the ass-worship, the drinking of the blood of slain children, the promiscuous orgies of darkness, the deadly hatred to all mankind, the Thyestean banquets and Œdipodean unions. He told all these things because he had heard them from common report, and had never taken the trouble to ascertain the truth.

'Have they any friends among the populace?' asked the Præfect.

'None,' replied the actor. 'The people hate them. They are foes to all pleasure: they will not enter a theatre. They spit when they pass a temple; they turn away with horror from sacrifices. They hate wine, and will never wear a garland. They are morose misanthropes, devoutly brutal, and capable of any crime.'

'It would be a good thing to get rid of such enemies of gods and men,' said Tigellinus. 'Do you think they could have been the authors of the late conflagration?'

'It is more than possible,' answered Aliturus. 'I hear that they often talk about the burning up of the world.'

'Yes,' said Poppæa; 'and the part of the city which has most completely escaped being burned is the region across the Tiber where most of them live.'

Nero clapped his hands with delight. 'Suspicion all points in that direction,' he said; 'but how could we get evidence against them?'

'It would not be easy, Cæsar. They meet in the most secret places, and have their watchwords.'

'That looks bad,' said Nero. 'I do not like secret meetings.'

'Could you not get into one of their assemblies and bribe some of them?' asked Tigellinus.

'I will try,' said Aliturus, 'if Cæsar wishes it. I can at any time disguise myself and alter my face so that no one can recognise me; and I dare say some slave will find out their watchword for me.'

'Manage this for us, Aliturus, and your reward shall be gold enough to make you a rich man for life. I gave a senator's property to Menecrates, the harpist, and a Consul's patrimony to Spicillus, the mirmillo, and a town-house and a villa to Paneros, the usurer. Cæsar knows how to reward with a princely hand those that serve him.'

'Cæsar is a god,' said the supple actor; 'and Aliturus will not fail him.'

CHAPTER LII

ALITURUS AMONG THE CHRISTIANS

Ἐὰν δὲ πάντες προφητεύωσιν, εἰσέλθῃ δέ τις ἄπιστος, ἐλέγχεται ὑπὸ πάντων, ἀνακρίνεται ὑπὸ πάντων. — S. Pauli I. ad Cor. xiv. 24.

ALITURUS did not find it easy to fulfil his promise. Ishmael Ben Phabi, stimulated by Sadducean hatred, made every inquiry among the Jews of Rome, and learnt much that was useful to him. Josephus, who had no special hatred against the Christians, but wished to know more about them, because, as a Pharisee, he was interested in their doctrine of the Resurrection, was able to give him some useful hints. Esther, a Jewish freedwoman of Nero, wife of Arescusus, was still more serviceable. At one time she had been drawn to the Christians by their sanctity of life, but she was an intense enthusiast of Mosaism, and, shocked by the views of gentile converts respecting the nullity of the Law, she had felt the reaction of antipathy against them.[1] But Primitivus, who had succeeded Phlegon (the lover of the epileptic girl Syra), as keeper of the Spoliarium, gave him the key he needed. Primitivus, in his work at the amphitheatre, had more than once come in contact with Christians, and Phlegon had told him what he had heard about them from Syra. He revealed to Aliturus the mystic watchword of the Fish.

Armed with this watchword, the actor managed to establish relations with Philetus, a slave of dubious character, who had nominally joined the Christians because he found among them a sympathy and a kindness which he had forfeited in his gentile surroundings. This thankless traitor conducted him one evening, in the disguise of an Ephesian merchant, into the remote sand-pit where the Christians held their largest gatherings.

He found himself in an assembly of at least a thousand

[1] Note 44.

persons, who had come by various roundabout obscure paths. A narrow opening led to the half-subterranean place of rendezvous, and this was strongly guarded by a body of Christian youths, who challenged and scrutinised every comer. As they entered, the worshippers extinguished their lamps and torches, and the vast space was in complete darkness, except that a few lights glimmered in its deepest recesses. Aliturus was accustomed to scenes of hardened wickedness, but he shuddered in expectation of the nameless horrors which pagan slander led him to suppose he would witness. How deep was his astonishment at the order, the decorum, the innocent fervour, the holy devotion, the almost childlike simplicity of the entire ceremony! Truly these men and women were no orgiastic rioters! Linus was in the chair of the chief pastor, and he was assisted by Cletus and other presbyters. Sometimes he offered up prayers for all, sometimes the whole assembly joined in common prayer, and the deep 'Amen' swelled like the sound of a mighty wave. They joined in hymns addressed to God and to Christ, and then the assembly was swept by the indescribable emotion of Spiritual Presence which found vent in speaking in the Tongue. But there was nothing disorderly or tumultuous in the manifestations, for the worshippers had taken to heart the warnings which Paul had given to the Church of Corinth. The pantomimist was struck with the awful depth and penetrative force of those strange sounds, which no skill of his — trained as he had been for years — would enable him to reproduce. When some rose to interpret the mysterious utterances, he heard many allusions to Babylon — which his Jewish origin made him recognise as a cryptogram for Rome — and references to the recent fire. But it was only spoken of as an awful judgment of God, a sign of Christ's second Advent, a prelude to the conflagration of the world. He heard nothing wicked, nothing seditious. On the contrary, every exhortation inculcated innocence and purity of life; and prayers were offered for the Emperor, and all in authority. In Roman society he had heard many a bitter jest, many a mordant innuendo aimed at the Emperor, by men who were too vain to conceal their sarcasms, even when they were perilous.[1] But here he heard no such

[1] Sen. *Controv.* iii. 12 (Boissier, p. 80).

objurgations. When the interpretation of tongues was over, Linus rose to address his flock.

He spoke first of the conflagration, and of all the disasters which they had recently witnessed. He alluded with many tears to the brethren who had perished in the burning streets, or lay buried under the ruins of fallen houses, and he bade them not to sorrow as men without hope, since the dead who die in the Lord were blessed. How far more awful was the fate of those worshippers of false gods, who had lived in defiant wickedness, and who, instead of passing from life to life, had passed from death unto death, and a fiery looking for of judgment! One practical duty he pressed upon them. Most of them were poor; but God had given them the true riches. And now that so many of their brethren were left destitute, it was their duty to show that they believed the words of the Lord Jesus, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The heathen said, 'See how these Christians love one another.' Yes, they loved one another, and all who were of the household of faith; but let them also be kind and gentle to those who treated them despitefully, remembering Him who had said, 'I say unto you, "Love your enemies."'

From this topic he passed to the duty of watchfulness. All around them lay the kingdom of Satan and of darkness. They knew its grossness, its misery. Their beloved Apostle Paul had painted it for them to the life in his letter to their Church. 'Be sober, then,' he said, 'be vigilant! Already there are wars and rumours of wars, and earthquakes, and famines, the sea and the waves roaring, and men's hearts failing them for fear of the things coming on the earth. Is not the mighty calamity which we have witnessed one of the birth-throes of the Messiah? Love not the world, therefore, brethren, nor the things of the world. Count the things that are, as though they are not. For, speaking in the Spirit, I tell you that very soon will the great tribulation begin, which must be before the end. But ye know the words of the Master, "He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved."'

A deep murmur rose from the multitude, and many wept at the thought of coming woes. But they did not shrink from the peril of that baptism of blood which they knew would be to them the portal of salvation, and the murmur swelled into

an Hosanna and a Hallelujah which rang with steadfastness and exultation.

Then Cletus, the second presbyter, rose and said: 'Our father Linus has spoken. He has warned us that evil days are at hand. Already it is whispered, we cannot tell by whom, that *our* hands kindled this great conflagration. You know, brethren, that we would rather die than be guilty of such a monstrous crime. But at the bar of the Gentiles innocence will not avail us; nor will pity touch the hearts of our enemies in Babylon, where Satan's throne is. But though a host should encamp against us, yet will we not be afraid. He who set His angel to stand by the three children in the furnace; He who saved Daniel from the lions, and Jonah in the belly of the whale, will not forsake us. We thank God in this great crisis that Paul, the Apostle to us Gentiles, has been set free. He knew not what was coming, or he would have stayed with us; but John the beloved is on his way to us, and he will comfort us in all our afflictions.'

At the close of his address, young men, clad in white, of modest demeanour, went round among the worshippers and received in earthen vessels the humble contributions of men and women, of whom not a few were themselves in deep poverty. Aliturus, moved to an extent of which he could give no account, dropped into the vessel every piece of gold which he had with him, and amazed those who afterwards counted the offerings. With uplifted arms and solemn voice, Linus pronounced the benediction. Lanterns and torches were re-kindled, and silently, in twos and threes, by the same secret paths, the multitude melted away.

But as he made his way home with the attendant slave, the heart of Aliturus burned within him. He had come to curse and to betray; he went back blessing these Christians altogether. How unlike was the reality to the lies which he had confidently believed! These men and women, whose name was the synonym of malefactor — those of whom the scum of the Forum spoke as incestuous cannibals — they were innocent, they were holy! they alone were innocent, they alone were holy! Aliturus had heard the philosophers talking together. How hard and unnatural were their doctrines; how inconsistent their lives; how hopeless their aspirations; how hollow their vaunts of blessedness compared with those of these

men! Among these was happiness, or it was nowhere. He had seen palaces — their gilded misery, their monotonous weariness, their reckless guilt — he had experienced the emptiness of that intoxicating fame which shouted in the voice of innumerable spectators. Alas, alas! what a bubble was the life of the gentile world, and what spectres followed those who chased it!

His thoughts went back to the days of a childhood spent in Hebron under the rustling boughs of the oak of Mamre. Happier for him had he lived and died in his native Palestine, unknown, innocent, faithful to the religion of his people. But his grandfather had been implicated in the tearing down of the golden eagle, instigated by the two bold young Rabbis Judas and Matthias, in the days of Herod the Great, and had been put to death. His father had struggled in vain against adversity, and his widowed mother, left in utter destitution, had died of a broken heart. Penniless and an orphan, the boy had been carried down to Gaza by a villainous agent of Herod, and had been sold to a Roman slave-dealer. This trader in human flesh had seen in him the promise of extraordinary beauty, which would enable him to repay himself in a few years a hundred times over the paltry sum which he had paid for the Jewish orphan. He kept him with care, fed him well, had him taught Greek, and gave him an artistic education — not from any feelings of kindness, but solely with a view to ultimate gain. He kept him apart from the other slave-boys of his shop, who were meant for less luxurious destinies, and would only command moderate prices as grooms or foot-boys. They, with chalked feet, were exposed for sale on the public *catasta* in sight of every passer-by, and could be purchased for little more than five hundred sesterces; but those who wished to see the brilliant Aliturus must be persons of wealth and distinction, who were admitted into the inner apartments, and who would be willing to pay at least eight thousand sesterces. He had been purchased by the wealthy and luxurious Sulla, who, charmed by his vivacity, grace, and genius, saw a means of enriching himself by having him trained as a pantomime. During these years Aliturus had not only seen the darkest side of pagan life, but had grown familiar with its viciousness in every form. Abandoning the religion of Moses, he had found no other in its place, and lived only for the present. On the

stage he had rapidly surpassed all competitors, with the exception of Paris, who shared with him the position of a favourite of the Roman people. The large sums of money which he amassed by his art enabled him to purchase his freedom before he was twenty-three; and, in a career of unchecked outward prosperity he had become a familiar inmate of the noblest patrician houses, and even of the imperial circle. For some years he had been the favourite of all the gilded youth, the darling of the Roman ladies. But the faith of his childhood still hung about him. Amid the giddiest whirl of vice and pleasure, he still felt in his heart an aching void; and the events of this evening had revealed to him not only how aching the void was, but also the misery and failure in which his life would end, with no vista beyond it save the darkness of the grave. Often before, in his lonelier moments, he had seen virtue and pined for its loss; but now that pure ideal shone before him with a more heavenly lustre, and remorse pierced him like a sword.

He awaited the next gathering of the Christians with feverish impatience — not with his first purpose of accumulating evidence for their extirpation, but rather for the sake of his own soul and that he might leave no stone unturned to save them. He was also deeply anxious to see him whom Cletus had described as 'John the beloved.' He longed to hear more of the Master whom the Christians worshipped with such passionate devotion, and to know wherein lay the secrets of the hope which He had kindled, of the peace which He had bequeathed, of the righteousness which He had placed within reach of attainment, not only by the noble and the learned, but by the despised and by paupers and by slaves.

It was to him a time of anxiety and trial. He had to act that week one of his favourite, most exciting, and most unworthy parts. He was pledged to it; myriads were expecting to see him in it; he had already received for it a large sum of money from Varro, the president of the games, and he had neither the courage to withdraw from it nor any appreciable excuse for doing so. He acted it with all his accustomed supremacy of skill, but he acted it mechanically and with a wounded conscience; and he listened to the thunders of applause which his grace evoked with loathing for himself and for his degraded audience. He returned to his house physi-

cally weary, but even more mentally prostrate, and, flinging himself on a couch, turned his face to the wall and wept. A summons from the Palace forced him to rouse himself, to put on a court dress, and assume his usual aspect of easy gaiety. Nero asked him with feverish eagerness whether he had succeeded in tracking the Christians to their haunts, and what evidence he had been able to collect against them.

'Give me time, Cæsar,' he said. 'I went three days ago to their assembly and I heard nothing which could be construed into sedition, and I saw nothing to their discredit. I am driven to disbelieve what I told you about them.'

'They are sly foxes,' said Nero. 'Poppæa has heard more about them from the Jew Josephus. You are not initiated into their mysteries, so that you did not really see what they are.'

'And what matters it what they are?' said Tigellinus. 'We must have *some* criminals to accuse of having caused the fire; and who so handy as this secret, morose, man-hating, child-killing, flesh-eating sect of darkness, whom the people detest, and whom in any case it would be a merit to exterminate?'

'Poor wretches!' said Aliturus. 'I should be sorry to do them more harm than I have done already; but after the next nundine I may have more to tell you.'

'That man is wavering,' said Tigellinus, when Aliturus had gone. 'He is a Jew, and he is not so much in earnest as he was. He seems to be touched by the squeamish effeminacy of pity.'

'Poppæa says that the Jews hate these Christians even more than we do,' answered Nero.

'Nevertheless, Cæsar, you may be certain that the two superstitions spring from the same root. I will find out the Christian haunts for myself. It is high time to strike a blow.'

CHAPTER LIII

'HE WHO SAW THE APOCALYPSE'

'Questi è colui, che giacque sopra 'l petto
Del nostro Pellicano ; e questi fue
Di su la croce al grande ufficio eletto.'

DANTE, *Paradiso*, XXV. 112–114.

THE slave Philetus came to the house of Aliturus on the next Sunday evening, and told him that the Christians now knew themselves to be menaced by imminent peril. They had consequently changed their place of meeting to another sand-pit near the Appian road, where they would be assembled in unusual numbers, expecting the presence of John, one of the twelve companions of Jesus whom they called Apostles. Aliturus, seeing the character of the man, who was one of those who are ever ready to sell their souls for gain, said as little to him as possible ; but while he donned his Ephesian disguise he determined to do his utmost to warn the Christians secretly of the toils which, before he knew their true character, he himself had designed to spread for them.

The worship of the congregation resembled that on the previous First-day evening, except that the impression of solemn expectation was even more thrilling and intense. Aliturus was at a distance from the Apostle, whom his fellow-Christians surrounded with a reverence akin to awe, and whose bearing, though full of love and humility, was yet more full of natural dignity than Aliturus had ever observed in Consul or Emperor. During the day the Apostle had walked through the areas of encumbered ruin and blackened waste, which in ten regions of the city were all that was left of Rome. He had walked along the lines of temporary huts in the Campus Martius, and heard the wail of men and women who refused to be comforted for the loss of all. He had stood behind the base of a half-calcined pillar on the Aventine when Nero had been carried past him in an open litter of

silver, in which he lolled on purple cushions. He was discinctured and clad in a light Coan *synthesis*, looking the picture of cruel and dissolute effeminacy. A young Greek slave shared his litter, and some of his worst associates laughed and jested by his side. The sight of the Antichrist had stirred the heart of John to uttermost indignation, and as he now rose in the assembly, the mystic golden *petalon* of priesthood upon his forehead flashing under the light of the lamps in the far recess of the sand-pit, his whole figure seemed to burn and dilate with inspired passion. He spoke at times with something of the holy frenzy of a Hebrew prophet, in language purposely couched in Eastern metaphors. To those who were unfamiliar with the style of Jewish Apocalypses, much of what he said might have seemed wholly unintelligible; but most of those who heard him had a clue to his utterances, either from their Jewish birth or from familiarity with sacred books of the Hebrews. Among these was Aliturus. Knowing the high authority of the speaker, the whole assembly listened with beating hearts to the tones of a voice which throbbed with fire and life, and sometimes rose to awful power.

In imagery afterwards embodied in his Apocalypse he spoke of a wild beast, rising out of the sea with a name of blasphemy on his forehead. And men worshipped the beast, and said, 'Who is like the wild beast?' and 'Who can fight against him?' Those who had heard of Nero in his disguise at the infamous banquet on the Lake of Agrippa knew that by the wild beast he meant the Emperor, and by the sea the sea of nations, and by the name of blasphemy the divine title Augustus, and by his superhuman exaltation the adoring flattery of his votaries. He described the misery of the people as of men gnawing their tongues for pain; and he spoke of a war of the wild beast against the saints, and of blood rolling in a great river; and of the vengeance which should follow, and of the vain rage of the nations against Him which is, and was, and is to come.

His voice ceased. He sat down, and an awful hush fell over the listeners. And then the whole assembly knelt down as with one great sob, and Aliturus sobbed with them. Pitying their emotion, the Beloved arose once more, and said: 'Nay, brethren, you must not return thus with broken

hearts to your homes. It is given unto me to foresee that ye must resist unto blood. Many of you must be tortured, many slain. At this moment there is a traitor among you, and it is no longer possible to escape. And there is another, not a traitor, but who meant to be an open enemy.' The speaker paused, and the heart of Aliturus became chill as a stone within him. 'But,' continued the Apostle, 'the grace of God hath called this one to repentance, and he shall be saved, though through much tribulation. And now, my children, give your customary gifts to God and to the suffering ones, for many are now in depths of affliction, and there are not a few of you whose children shall be fatherless and their wives widows, who must be the care of the Church hereafter. But I say to you all, as our Lord said the night that He was betrayed, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." And as my last words, take this His new commandment: "Little children, love one another."'

He bade them sing a hymn to calm their troubled souls, and they sang:—

'Curb for the stubborn steed,
Making its will give heed;
Wing that directest right
The wild bird's wandering flight;
Helm for the ships that keep
Their pathway on the deep;
Our stay when cares annoy,
Giver of endless joy,
O Jesus, hear!

'Thine infant children seek,
With baby lips all weak,
Filled with the Spirit's dew
From that dear bosom true,
Thy praises pure to sing,
Hymns meet for Thee, their King;
O Jesus, hear!

'We, heirs of peace unpriced,
We, who are born in Christ,
A people pure from stain,
Praise we our God again!
O Jesus, hear!'[1]

The deacons went round among the worshippers, and collected the alms. Aliturus, more deeply moved than ever in

[1] Note 45.

his life, flung into the offering the large sum of gold which he had received for his unhallowed dance. Linus rose and said, 'Beloved, the times are perilous. We know not when or where the cloud will burst. Let us meet again on the third day hence, and hear the word of exhortation.'

Then the Apostle committed them to God's gracious mercy and protection, and to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit; and once more, like phantoms, that great throng melted into the darkness.

But Aliturus, telling Philetus that it would be better for them to separate, dismissed him, and waited for the presbyters who were conducting John to the house of Linus.

'I would speak to thee,' he said, addressing the Apostle in Hebrew, which he had not entirely forgotten since the day when he learnt it at his brave father's knee. 'I am —'

'I know thee who thou art, my son,' answered the Apostle, in the same language. 'Thou wast born a child of Abraham; thou hast become a firstborn of Satan. Yea, weep, for thy sins have been many; yet rejoice, for thou shalt be snatched as a brand out of the burning.'

'I have never been a Christian, O Apostle,' said Aliturus; 'I have never heard the name of Christ except in mockery; but now, convinced of all, judged of all, I see that the secret of God is with you. I have led you into peril, but I did it ignorantly, and now, if thou wouldst direct me, I fain would do my utmost to save you all.'

'Thou shall be forgiven, my son, because (as thou sayest) thou didst it ignorantly: but save us thou canst not. Nevertheless, do what thou canst, and may God be with thee!'

'Oh that I might ask for thy blessing; for my heart is sore even to breaking.'

'My son,' said the Apostle, laying his hand on the bowed head of the actor; 'the blessing of God is with them that repent, and the Lord rejecteth none who come to Him.'

They parted in the darkness, and the next day Aliturus sought an audience with the Emperor alone. He had been so great a favourite that Nero always rejoiced to see him, and to while away an hour under the spell of his natural brightness. But, to his surprise, Aliturus had no sooner kissed his hand than he flung himself at his feet and craved his indulgence.

'What ails the gay actor?' asked Nero. 'Is it something more about these Christians?'

'It is,' said the actor. 'Spare them, Emperor. Spare them, I entreat you. I have ascertained that they are perfectly innocent. Cæsar has no more virtuous subjects.'

'Virtue?' said Nero. 'It is three-fourths humbug, and the other fourth hypocrisy. Give me pleasure; give me art. These fanatics would quench all joy in the world. They would kill Venus and starve Bacchus. I hate them.'

'Would Cæsar slay the innocent?'

'Innocent? They are anything but innocent. They are conspirators, and sorcerers, and murderers, and haters of mankind.'

'Oh, Cæsar,' exclaimed the actor, in despair. 'I, too, believed this; but these are only the lies of the multitude.'

'At any rate, they are gloomy and pestilent fanatics. Why should Aliturus care for the wretches who worship a man whom Pilatus crucified? What is their execrable superstition to Rome's favourite pantomime? I am to be king of the East, and these Galileans set up another king, whom they call Christus. It is flat sedition! Besides, how am I to appease the populace, if I do not find them some victims?'

'You may yet find the true criminals, Cæsar; it may be that they are nearer your own person than these poor Christians.'

'Don't let Tigellinus hear you say that, or you may yet know what the *tunica molesta* is like, and may leave a trail of burning pitch on the sand of the amphitheatre! Come, Aliturus, this is tedious. Enough of it. I prefer your dancing.'

At this moment Poppæa entered, and the young man withdrew. As he passed down the corridor the slaves were surprised to see the bright darling of the populace wringing his hands and muttering 'Too late! too late!'

On one point he was determined. No word, no sign of his should do any further injury to the Christians. He would not reveal their meeting-place, nor help their enemies.

Alas! his aid was no longer needed. We can abstain from evil deeds, but when we have done them their con-

sequences are beyond us, nor can we escape their punishment. Tigellinus, by his spies, had put himself in communication with Philetus; he knew enough to palliate in the eyes of the people the arrest of a community which they regarded with detestation. His nets were spread in every direction. Unless the Christians abandoned all attempt at meeting together, it was impossible that they could escape the agents of the tyranny which had determined to destroy them as the scapegoat of its own crimes. To warn them would in any case have been in vain, and Aliturus was unable to warn them, for Tigellinus did not make him a confidant of his intentions.

Unaccompanied by Philetus, the actor went to the meeting which Linus had announced, and found the Christians gathered in undiminished numbers, anxious to hear once more the words of him who at the Last Supper had leaned his head on the bosom of their Lord.

Again — lest in the presence of traitors and enemies he should use language which might be turned into an engine of condemnation against the brethren — the Apostle addressed them in allegoric terms. The Christians understood his words, and the rich comfort which lay beneath their poetic imagery. But he had not been speaking long, when from the narrow entrance which led into the sandpit — for the Christians had barricaded every approach but one — there arose first a cry of surprise, then a sound of struggling, and a clash of arms, and a tramp of feet. The youths to whom was entrusted the guardianship of the approach were borne back by numbers, and flying into the assembly raised a shout of 'Fly, brethren, fly! the Prætorians are upon us.' The lamps flashed on the gilded armour of a centurion, who leapt, sword in hand, into the midst of the worshippers. In a moment every lamp was extinguished, and by the straggling starlight might be caught glimpses of a scene of wild confusion, as men and shrieking women sprang in vain to the egress, and, driven back on each other by the swords of the soldiers, struggled in mad panic towards the various subterranean hiding-places and passages, which branched out of the sandpit, and were the beginning of the catacombs. Many made their escape in the tumult, for they were more familiar than the soldiers with the exits and winding ways. Except

that one or two Christians were struck to earth and trampled upon in the obscurity, no blood was shed; for the principles of the Christians forbade them to resist lawful authority. The centurion, the moment he entered, strode straight towards the group of presbyters, and arrested Linus, who sat in the seat of the bishop. Another officer laid his hand on the robe of the Apostle, but while Aliturus involuntarily sprang forward to make him release his hold, a gigantic *fossor* — whose trade it was to hew graves in the tufa for all the brethren — flung his arms round the officer, and pinned them to his side, while Cletus, seizing the hand of John, hurried him along a tortuous and half-subterranean path by which they emerged into the upper air. They lay concealed among the thick leaves of a vineyard, until they heard the tramp of the soldiers who marched off with about a hundred prisoners, whose arms they had tied behind their backs. Aliturus was in no personal danger, but he had followed the escaping steps of Cletus and the Apostle, and he lay hidden with them in the vineyard till the sound of footsteps had died away in the echoing gloom.

'Alas, father, what can I do?' exclaimed the presbyter. 'I am but a freedman in the house of the senator Nerva. I have no home, no refuge to offer thee which would not be full of hardship and the peril of certain death.'

'Come to my house,' exclaimed Aliturus to the Apostle, eagerly. 'I am not a Christian — I am but a pantomime. But, if thou wilt trust me, thy life will be safer with me than in any house in Rome, till opportunity enables thee to escape to Asia.'

'My son,' said the Apostle, 'I trust thee. Lead me on.'

That night the son of Zebedee was sheltered in the house of the actor, who told his most confidential slaves to treat with all honour a friend of Jewish race who had come from Palestine. But all night long the Apostle was on his knees, praying for his brethren. For the Great Tribulation — the first of the ten great Christian persecutions — had begun.

CHAPTER LIV

IN THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE

'Α γαπητοὶ μὴ ξενίζεσθε τῇ ἐν ὑμῖν πυρώσει πρὸς πειρασμὸν ὑμῖν γινομένῃ. — 1 Pet. iv. 12.

'Christianus etiam extra carcerem sæculo renuntiavit, in carcere autem etiam carceri.' — TERT. *Ad Mart* 2.

THE prisoners, men and women alike, were hurried into promiscuous dungeons, in a suffocating confinement which was itself an anticipated death. Next day an edict was published by the Emperor, saying that the Christians were the incendiaries of Rome, and would be set apart for exemplary punishment. He characterised the whole sect as public enemies, enemies of the gods, and of the human race, whom he should make it his duty as far as possible to exterminate. The edict was well received. It was at first supposed that its allegations were true, and that the Emperor had really succeeded in lifting from his rule the vast weight of indignation which had threatened to endanger it.

Next day, half suffocated and half starved, and altogether in miserable plight, a number of the prisoners were put to the torture, to enforce confession and a betrayal of their accomplices. Tigellinus personally presided, and gloated over their torments. It had become known that Linus was their leader, and he was the first to suffer. The old man remained nobly constant. Urged to confess his crime, he said, 'I am a Christian; but to be a Christian is not a crime.' Charged with complicity in the deeds of darkness which were attributed to Christians, he indignantly repudiated them, and said that the laws of Christians branded not only such deeds with infamy, but even those vices which the heathen regarded as indifferent or venial. Bidden to give up the names of his fellow-Christians, he said that they were many, but that he would rather die than betray them. No added intensity of torment could wring from him anything further,

and he was carried back to prison, a pitiable sufferer, dislocated in every limb. Indeed, so nigh was he unto death, that the jailors, burdened by the crowded and horrible condition of the prisoners, accepted a bribe from the Christians to allow him to be removed. He was taken, by Pomponia's kindness, into her own house, and there was lovingly tended many days. He lived to send a greeting to Timotheus by St. Paul some years later; but he was never again able to resume his functions as the bishop of the little community. Stricken to the heart by the anguish of witnessing the apparent destruction of the Church, and hopelessly maimed by torture, he was removed in secrecy to one of the country villas of Aulus Plautius, and after being long confined to his bed, he died no less a martyr of the Neronian persecution than any of his brethren.

Others showed equal fortitude. Foiled and savage, Tigellinus noticed among the prisoners a timid, shrinking boy, and ordered him to be stripped and laid upon the rack, confident that anything might be wrung from him. But the poor boy could only keep repeating,

'I am a Christian! I am a Christian! but we are innocent. We do no wrong. The crimes you charge us with are false.'

'Give up the names of your accomplices, jail-bird,' said Tigellinus, striking him fiercely on the cheek.

'I am no jail-bird,' said the boy; 'I am free-born. Oh, set me free from this anguish! I have done no wrong.'

'You shall try another turn or two of the rack first, *crucisalus*,' said Tigellinus. 'Confess, and you shall not only be set free, but rewarded.'

His limbs were stretched still further. A groan of agony burst from his lips, and the sweat stood in thick dews over the face which had become pale as death; but he spoke not, and fainted. When they were taken back to prison, the Christians did their utmost to tend and console the glorious young confessor.

'How were you strengthened,' they asked him, 'to endure such pangs?'

'When all was at the worst,' he said, 'it seemed to me that music sounded in my ears, and a fair youth with wings stood by me who wiped the perspiration from my forehead. And seeing him I felt that I could hold out even to death.'

'Try a woman this time,' said Tigellinus.

The executioners seized the deaconess Phœbe, who, since she left Cenchreæ with the Epistle to the Romans, had stayed and worked in Rome; and with her they seized two other virgins who were also deaconesses.

But the constancy of womanhood also remained unshaken, and the Præfect began to fear that the attempt to secure evidence would fail as completely as in his plot against Octavia. He stamped, and cursed the Christians by all his gods, and raved impotently against their brutal obstinacy, as effort after effort failed. Then he ran his experienced eyes over the throng, and fixed them on one man whose abject face seemed to promise good effects from the application of terror. His name was Phygellus.

'Seize that man,' he said to the lictors.

'Oh, do not torture me!' exclaimed the wretch. 'I am not — I am not, indeed, a Christian.'

The other Christians turned their eyes upon him with a look of reproach, and he trembled; but he continued to asseverate, 'I am not a Christian.'

'Then how came you to be arrested in the assembly of those vagabonds?'

'They seduced me; they bewitched me; they are sorcerers.'

'Then throw these grains of frankincense on the fire in honour of Jupiter, and worship the Genius of the Emperor.'

The man did as he was required, though the Christians murmured to him —

'Will you be an apostate? Will you deny the cross of Christ?'

'Now then,' said Tigellinus, 'tell us the names of their ringleaders.'

Phygellus hesitated. He had been ready to save himself; but he had not contemplated the destruction of his fellows.

'On to the rack with him!' said Tigellinus.

The man was laid shrieking on the instrument of torture, but the moment the screw was turned, he cried,

'I will confess; I will confess.'

'Do the Christians kill infants, and eat their flesh?'

'No.'

'Do you persist in that?'

'Yes.'

'Try the rack again.'

'Spare me! spare me!' he cried. 'If you torture me, I shall say anything — any lie you ask me; but these stories about the Christians are not true.'

'Will you now tell us all you know, without any more torture?'

'I will.'

'Did the Christians set fire to Rome?'

'I did not see them doing it; but they were always talking about Christ being manifested in flaming fire, and about the burning of the world.'

'That will do. Now give us some names.'

'There are hundreds — there are thousands of them,' said the renegade.

'Then it will be all the easier for you to tell us some of them.'

'Must I?' he pleaded. 'They have done no harm.'

'On to the rack with him,' said Tigellinus, furiously. 'He trifles with us and wastes our time.'

'No, no,' moaned the coward; 'I will tell you. There is Linus the bishop, and Cletus the presbyter, and Prisca, and Aquila.'

'Who are they?'

'They are Jewish tent-makers, and they live on the Aventine; but they left Rome recently. And Amplias, Claudia, Stachys, Apelles, of the household of Narcissus; Persis, a freedwoman of Pomponia Græcina; Asyncritus, Patrobas, slaves of Flavius Clemens; and Nereus and his daughter Junia, manumitted by the centurion Pudens.'

'We want more names still.'

'There are Marcus, Felicitas, Phœbe, Helpis, in the house of Aulus Plautius; and there are Tryphæna, Tryphosa, Stephanus, Crescens, Thallus, Herodion, and Artemas, of Cæsar's household.'

'None but slaves and freedmen?'

'There is Aristobulus, the auctioneer, who has a house in the Subura. He and all his family are Christians. And Andronicus, and Junius — they are merchants who import goats' hair from Cilicia, and are relations of Paulus of Tarsus, whom they call an Apostle.'

'Come, this is to the purpose,' said Tigellinus, rubbing his hands. 'Are there any soldiers?'

'Yes; Vitalis and Celsus, the Prætorians, and, I think, Pudens the centurion, who has gone to Britain and —'

He stopped suddenly, and his face assumed a look of terror. For the soldier Urbanus who stood behind the chair of Tigellinus was one who, though not yet a Christian, had been among those who had been chained to Paul, and had acquired a kindly feeling towards the persecuted brethren. Fixing his eyes on the apostate, he made so menacing a gesture with his hand on his dagger, that Phygellus began to stammer.

'I do not know,' he said, 'the names of any more soldiers.'

'Are there any persons of rank?'

Fortunately Phygellus had never found much favour among the Christians. Their leaders had not entrusted to him their secrets. He was unaware that Pomponia was a Christian, and had not heard of the conversion of Flavius Clemens and Domitilla. But he ventured at haphazard to mention Aliturus, whom he had seen in the tumult.

But Tigellinus knew that it was not yet time to interfere with such a man as Aliturus. He laughed aloud.

'What!' he said; 'do you think that on the evidence of such scum as you we are going to arrest the delight of the populace — the gayest and fairest pantomime in Rome? There, we have had enough of you.'

And, spurning him with his foot, he bade the lictors to keep him safe till more evidence was required.

There were a few others — chiefly neophytes and catechumens of unformed character — who, either from indifference and insincerity, or to escape for the moment from the tormentors, gave evidence sufficient for the nefarious purpose of the Præfect. The consequence was a wholesale series of arrests, till every prison in Rome was crowded to deadliness with innocent confessors, who, while they denied all crime, admitted themselves to be Christians, and were ready, if God so willed, to die for their faith.

Tigellinus savagely recommended to Nero that they should be executed in a mass.

'Rome,' he said, 'is too crowded. As it is, Cæsar,

you are maintaining many thousands of the destitute, and among them hundreds of these Christians, whose lodgings have been burnt. Why not get rid of such criminal wretches?'

'All the people hate them,' said Poppæa, 'as despisers of the gods, and all the Jews hate them. From Josephus, and the High Priest, and Tiberius Alexander, the nephew of their great writer Philo, who once headed a deputation to the Emperor Gaius, I hear nothing of them but evil.'

'Their arrest has made a wonderful difference already,' said Tigellinus, 'and has silenced many inconvenient rumours. Publish another edict, Emperor, saying that you have now the amplest evidence of their guilt, and that they shall be executed when you have decided the method of their death.'

'I will reserve some of their ringleaders for more conspicuous punishment,' said Nero. 'The common herd can be dealt with afterwards.'

'We have got the man they call their bishop,' said the Præfect. 'He is an artisan named Linus. He has been tortured, and is said to be dying. But we can strike a deadlier blow yet. My spies tell me that one of the Twelve they call Apostles, whose name is John, is in Rome, and that another is on his way whose name is Peter. They were friends of him whom they call Christus. We have lost sight of John for the moment; but we shall make sure of having them both soon.'

The Church in Rome was smitten to the very dust by the terrible blow which had befallen her, and it was necessary that the brethren should take the utmost precautions, and meet only in the deepest secrecy. In this they were aided by Aliturus. He had a villa a short distance from Rome on the Salarian road, the grounds of which could be approached by country paths known to few but shepherds and goatherds. To this villa he took the Apostle John for safety, and there he received from him such wise and loving instruction that he became a catechumen. Meanwhile he freely used the wealth which he had acquired, to alleviate the sufferings of the brethren. The visiting of those in prison was regarded as one

of the primary duties of the Christian's life, and no considerations of personal safety were allowed to interfere with it. The Apostle went from prison to prison breaking bread, and entrusting to the officers of the Church, or to those who had been longest in the faith, the money which was supplied to him by Pomponia and by the actor. In this way he and others, who were as yet unmolested, were enabled to minister to the necessities of the captives, and also to speak to them such words of hope as fell upon their souls like dew from heaven. It was inevitable that his noble and venerable figure should soon be recognised. The spies of the Præfect were everywhere, and, noticing the profound reverence with which the Elder was received, they were soon able to identify him. He had prepared Aliturus to expect that if on any day he did not return to the villa it would be because he was lodged in prison. The ordinary dungeons were so full that the Apostle was confined in the wet and rocky vault of the Mamertine.

In that prison he was visited by Pomponia, who contributed by every means in her power to mitigate his hardships, and received his counsel and his apostolic blessing. She no longer hesitated to go in person to console the confessors. She found, indeed, that they needed but little consolation. The majority of them were in a state of spiritual exaltation which made their faces radiant and transformed their hard fare into manna which was angels' food. They turned their prisons into minsters, and the coarse pagan jailors and German guards were amazed when they heard those abodes of misery ringing with sweet voices and the holy melodies of unknown songs. In each place of confinement they held their daily worship, conducted by presbyter, or deacon, or reader, and broke with one another the bread of Holy Communion. They knew that death awaited them, but death was to be a martyrdom, and they looked to it, not as a curse, but as a coronation. Pomponia, sharing all their feelings, found that it was only to their bodily wants that she had need to minister.

She did not shrink from personal danger: if arrested, she would have at once avowed that she was a Christian. But her name had not been mentioned by those who gave evidence. Having once been tried on the charge of holding a foreign superstition and acquitted, it was contrary to the principle of the Roman law that she should again be accused. The deadly

wrong which Nero's wickedness had already inflicted on Aulus Plautius had excited an indignation among all the best elements of Roman society, which, though it was voiceless, had made itself felt; and among the populace Pomponia was half worshipped for her abounding kindness and large-handed charities. Her visiting of the prisons was set down to the same strange but harmless eccentricity which made her eschew jewels and wear robes of such sombre hue.

One day, during a visit to the largest prison, she encountered Tigellinus, who was going his rounds with an escort of Prætorians to exult over the multitudes of his victims. He inspired such dread that the noblest senators cringed to him, and Pomponia had reason to know that he hated her with all the energy of wickedness which is reproved by the spectacle of virtue.

He made her a low obeisance of mock respect, which she scarcely noticed by the slightest inclination of her head.

'The fair Pomponia is fond of prisons,' he said, with a sneer, 'but she despises the poor Præfect of the Prætorians.'

'Pomponia,' she replied, 'is not accustomed to the language of insincere and empty compliment. She despises none; but, if the Præfect desires her opinion, there are some of his humblest soldiers whom she respects more than him.'

Tigellinus cast on her a glance of savage hatred. He quailed before her queenly dignity of goodness, but could not bear to be foiled in the hearing of his escort, whose smiles had scarcely been suppressed.

'Let Pomponia take care that she does not herself become the denizen of a prison. Some have whispered that she is as much a Christian as these whom she visits, and deserves the same fate.'

'I deserve it,' she says, 'as much and as little as these do, for none knows better than Tigellinus that they are perfectly innocent.'

Tigellinus lost all self-control. 'Do you not know, woman,' he exlaimed hoarsely, 'that your life is in my power?'

'Man!' she answered, with the calmest disdain, 'you are addressing the wife of Aulus Plautius. My life is not in your power, but in the power of Him who gave it. I leave you, and shall continue to tend these hapless prisoners.'

She passed by him and he dared not meet her glance. To

beard Tigellinus required a courage of which scarcely one person was capable. But Pomponia thought it her duty to attempt a yet more dangerous effort, and, if possible, to have an appeal made to the Emperor on behalf of the doomed Christians. She went to Seneca in his retirement. She found him anxious and miserable, full of disappointment and self-disgust. He did not respond to her entreaties. 'I have no sympathy,' he said, 'with the Christians. They are only a sect of the Jews, and I should like to see their whole superstition eradicated.'

'You call it their superstition,' said Pomponia. 'Is it more of a superstition than the worship of what you have called "our ignoble crowd of gods"?'

'Perhaps not,' said Seneca. 'But the popular religion is one thing, and philosophy is another.'

'Would you, then, be content to see the mass of the pagan population unjustly tortured, unjustly slain, because their religion is a noxious superstition?'

'They do not render themselves amenable to the laws.'

'Nor do these poor Christians. I know their tenets. Their moral teaching again and again reminds me of your own, which it sometimes resembles almost to verbal identity.'

'I have heard,' said Seneca, 'that their Paulus of Tarsus has genius and style; but it is to me incredible. What can he know of philosophy?'

'Pardon me, dear friend,' replied Pomponia, 'he knows a philosophy far diviner than that of the Porch, far nobler than that of the Garden or the Lyceum. It is a philosophy which may not puff up the pride of intellect, but can sway the motives of the life. You may perhaps find in Rome—though I doubt it—ten philosophers who live purely and simply, but I could find you many hundreds of Christians.'

'Men of the common herd,' he said, in a tone of some disdain.

'Are they not our fellow-men? Did not one God make them and us? Did He mean only a handful to be blessed, and the rest to perish? Have you no pity for them? Have not you yourself said, "Man is a sacred thing to man"?'

'Why should I waste my life in an unavailing pity? Pity is a weakness which the true philosopher should suppress.'

'Ah!' replied Pomponia, 'I see the secret why Stoicism

fails. It talks of following nature, and it flings away its sweetest elements.'

'I could do nothing for you, Pomponia, even if I would,' said Seneca, wearily; 'I live a daily death.'

'A daily death?' she replied — 'in this splendid palace, with every resource of wealth, with slaves, with villas, with books, with gardens, with boundless fame, with a wife faithful and beloved, with a host of friends?'

'What avail such things,' said Seneca, 'with the sword of Damocles trembling over my neck? My only safety is the life which I describe in my little tragedy of "Thyestes" — a life which causes neither jealousy nor fear, and where one does not dread to drink poison in golden goblets.[1] If I am alive at this moment, I believe I owe it to the fact that my freedman Cleonicus, whom Nero bribed to poison me, failed to do so because I only eat fruits from the tree, and drink nothing but running water.[2] Yet I am wretched. Sometimes I all but accept the view that, after all, men are no better than a laughing-stock of the gods, whatever gods there be.'

'And are you so miserable, Seneca,' she said, 'and so hopeless? Come with me to the prisons of the poor Christians, and I will show you men who are poor and yet happy; ground to the dust by daily hatred and cruelty, in hunger, and nakedness, and prison, and yet happy; with torture and the vilest deaths immediately awaiting them, and yet happy. Shall I tell you how Paulus of Tarsus describes himself and them? "We are troubled on every side," he wrote to Corinth, "yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."'

'That is very eloquent,' said Seneca. 'I should like to read more that this Christian has written.'

'You shall,' she answered; 'and you will find in his letters something better than eloquence of style. But will you despise, will you do nothing to assist, the men and women whose faith enables them not only to *write* thus, but thus to live?

Seneca sighed deeply. 'My power with the Emperor is gone, and I am menaced with death and confiscation. But I am rich still, Pomponia. Take the sum of gold in this purse. It may at least help to relieve the sufferings of these poor

[1] Sen. *Thyest.* 446. [2] Tac. *Ann.* xv. 45.

creatures, perhaps even to secure by bribes the escape of some of them. It is all that I can do.'

Pomponia did not refuse it, and bade him a kindly farewell. But she never visited the philosopher without feeling, in spite of her affection for him and her gratitude to him, how ineffectual were his half-truths, how vain the pomp of declamatory epigram in which they were enshrined. The same ineffectualness, having its roots in an insincerity so insincere as to be habitual and unconscious, marked the whole of the contemporary morality. It ended, and was understood to end, in self-deceiving words.

But, having failed with Seneca, Pomponia hardly knew what to do. To the Emperor himself she would not go. His mere presence, since his foul murder of her young Aulus, made her tremble with loathing as though she stood before an incarnate demon. His leering sensuous looks, his slothful obesity, his face deformed by an eczema caused by gluttony, intemperance, and uncleanness, filled her with such repulsion that she could not speak to him. But she had sometimes met Poppæa in her least guilty days, when she was the wife of Rufius Crispinus, and she hoped that there might remain some spot in the heart of the lovely Empress which was not wholly callous to the appeal of pity.

To her surprise she found Poppæa bathed in tears, and gently asked her why she wept. There was something about Pomponia which seemed at once to awaken confidence. She had that temperament which in modern times would be called magnetic, and she always called out the best feelings of those with whom she spoke. The haughty, beautiful, triumphant wife of Nero would not have dreamed of suffering any one to be admitted to her in a moment of sorrow and weakness, except the wife of Aulus Plautius. To others she never appeared except in dresses such as the world could not parallel, surrounded by luxury, and breathing of the most delicate perfumes. But as Pomponia entered she did not even attempt to remove the stain of tears from her glowing cheeks, or to arrange the disordered tresses of her gleaming hair.

'Pomponia is welcome,' she said. 'She does not often deign to visit the poor Empress. She should have been a vestal virgin, and moved about surrounded by sanctities. But we wicked people have our sorrows too. I was thinking

of my boy Rufius. I love him more than anything on earth, and Nero hates to see him, and will not let him visit me. The poor boy might just as well have no mother.'

Pomponia paused before she spoke, and had to gulp down a choking sob. 'I can sympathise with you, Empress. My son Aulus was a little older than your charming Rufius. He was manly; he was beautiful; he gave promise of all his father's virtues.'

'I know, I know,' said Poppæa, turning away her face, on which rose, in spite of herself, a burning blush. 'He offended Nero in some way, and he is dead.'

'He offended him not,' said Pomponia. 'How could an innocent lad like my Aulus have been guilty of treason? Let us speak no more of him. There are those for whom death is more merciful than life, and I did not come here to bewail my own bereavements.'

'I pleaded for your boy, Pomponia — indeed, I did. I deigned to prostrate myself before Nero that he would not injure him, that he would not have him slain. Would you believe that I — I, the Empress, — have fears lest something evil should be done to my young Rufius?'

'May Heaven protect his youth!' said Pomponia. 'If it will be any comfort to you I will see him, and ask him to our palace. My husband is kind to all the young, and will love him for the sake of his own lost boy. And I will take your messages to him.'

'Thanks, Pomponia, thanks,' said the Empress. 'Nowhere could he be better than in your virtuous home. But why have you sought me — you to whom the Palace is justly hateful?'

'I come,' answered Pomponia, 'to plead for your pity. There is not a prison in Rome which is not full of innocent men and women, called Christians. They are charged with having set fire to Rome, and with many other atrocities. Empress, they are innocent! Will you not use your influence for them? If you have ever done evil — forgive me, Poppæa, but I know not the language of falsehood, or of flattery — will you not now try to do a great deed of good?'

'Your kindness deceives you,' answered the Empress. 'From all that I have heard they thoroughly deserve their fate.'

'Your mind has been poisoned against them by their

enemies the Jews. Believe me, Poppæa — for I know them well — their lives are almost the only beautiful lives spent in this wicked city.'

'Anything I could say for them would be in vain, Pomponia. I am not as you are — would that I were! — but let me tell you what no other living being should hear from me. Since our child Claudia died, I am no longer all-powerful with Nero. I can stimulate his course in evil — a touch will do that; but I cannot turn him from any wrong on which he and Tigellinus have agreed.'

Seeing that her efforts were useless, Pomponia left her, and would have kissed her hand; but the Empress kissed her on the cheek, and said, 'Oh, Pomponia, deign to be the friend of the hapless Poppæa. The work of her ambitious guilty dreams is already crumbling into ruins. She needs to have one friend who is not wicked.'

In times so oppressive the Christians who were still free could not forego the duty and support of common prayer and Holy Communion, however great might be the risk. Accustomed to hatred and persecution, they were also accustomed to precautions and secret signs, and by ways of communicating with each other unobserved and unexpected they made it known that on the next Sunday, deep in the night, they would meet in a secluded vineyard at the back of the villa of Aliturus, and that Peter of Bethsaida, the Apostle of Christ, had arrived in Rome, and would be present.

By far routes, under the curtain of darkness, they met in the vineyard, a deeply sorrowing and diminished band. But they felt reasonably secure. Aliturus was beloved by his slaves, to whom he was always generous, and he had trusted those in whom he most confided to watch on every side, and give signals by waving a torch at the slightest approach of danger. He himself went to the assembly, and, though as a catechumen he could not receive the holy mysteries, he joined in the prayers, and received the blessing of Peter, as he had received the blessing of John. Nothing could have been more comforting than the brief words of the great Apostle. His gray hair added to the venerable aspect of his advancing years; but his eye was undimmed, his

cheek still ruddy with the long years of the winds of Galilee, and holy courage shone in his weather-beaten features. There was a certain fire and force in all he said which gave it an impressiveness beyond that which was contained in the words themselves. Plain and practical as was 'the pilot of the Galilean Lake,' there hung about him a reflection of something which elevated him above himself — as though the sunlight of Gennesareth still played around him, and the glory of Hermon shone upon his face. Everywhere among the good he commanded the deep reverence which his simplicity did not seek; and everywhere among the evil, he inspired the awe which his humble manliness might seem to deprecate. He told the Christians that he had hastened his journey to Rome, when he had heard at Corinth the frightful perils with which his beloved brethren were surrounded. Were they suffering as Christians? Then happy were they! Had not Jesus said, 'Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake; but he that endureth to the end shall be saved'? Only let them give no ground for the enemy to blashpheme. 'It is the will of God, brethren,' he said — and every syllable came home to their hearts in the deep stillness — 'that by well-doing ye put to silence the ignorance of foolish men; as free, yet not using your freedom as a pretext for vice, but as the servants of God. Christ suffered for us; let us be ready to suffer for Him. Be united, then, brethren; have compassion one for another in this dread crisis; be not afraid of their faces; be not afraid of their words; be not afraid of their terror; neither be troubled, but sanctify the Lord God, and the peace which passeth understanding shall stand sentry over your hearts.'

The Apostle ceased, and Cletus, who during the desperate illness of Linus was the leading presbyter, told the brethren that, from information which had reached him, a fresh edict would be immediately proclaimed, which declared Christianity to be an unlawful religion, and threatened with the worst forms of death any one who was convicted of it. Under these circumstances they could not find a securer place of meeting than the present, but they were surrounded by spies, and in spite of all caution must be prepared for the worst. And John the Beloved, from the vault of the Tullianum, had sent them his blessing, and messages of peace.

CHAPTER LV

TWO MARTYRDOMS

'And as the Apostle, on the hill
Facing the Imperial town,
First gazed upon his fair domain,
Then on the Cross lay down :

So thou, from out the streets of Rome
Didst turn thy failing eye
Unto that mount of martyrdom,
Take leave of it, and die.'

NEWMAN.

'. . . aut crucibus affixi, aut flammandi.' — TAC. *Ann.* xv. 44.

THE Apostle Peter, whose friends were chiefly among the Jewish Christians, went to his humble quarters across the Tiber, where Miriam, a Jewish widow, had provided a lodging for him, his wife Plautilla, and his daughter Petronilla. If he had held his life dear unto himself, he would have left Rome without delay, or only have walked out at night and in secrecy. So long as he stayed in the Trastevere, it was not likely that the myrmidons of Tigellinus could find out his hiding-place. But this he would not do. The restless energy of his character rendered inaction impossible to him, and a voice ever rang in his ears from the lilied fields of Galilee, 'I was hungry, and ye gave me meat. I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; naked, and ye clothed me: sick and in prison, and ye visited me. . . . And inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto Me.' He asked Miriam's son to guide him to the prisons, and spent the whole day among his suffering brethren. Wherever he went, his presence was to them as the sunlight, and the most wavering could not but be confirmed by his calm wisdom, his genial tenderness, and the lessons which he so freely imparted to them from his personal memories of the Divine Example. It

needed money to secure admission into their places of confinement, and Aliturus and Pomponia had seen that sufficient was provided for all his needs. But the inevitable result followed. The jailors noticed the tumult of joy which hailed his presence, and saw that he was some great leader among the Christians. Tigellinus had given orders that the ringleaders of the baleful superstition should be seized, and especially those whom they called Apostles. His emissaries, listening to the conversations of the Christians among themselves, were not long in ascertaining that this was Peter of Bethsaida, and that in securing him and John they would have seized two chief personages of the entire Christian community throughout the world, and two who had been personal friends and followers of the Crucified founder of the sect. Before evening the spies had ascertained the quarter of the city where Peter was lodged.

It was from Simon the Sorcerer that Tigellinus learnt who Peter was, and how important was the place which he filled in the new community. This miserable impostor — the father of all heresies — had won himself wealth and power, and something not far short of adoration, not only in Samaria, but in many kingdoms. It was owing to his detestable machinations that Drusilla, the sister of Agrippa, had been persuaded to desert her husband, King Azizus of Emesa, and to become the mistress of Felix, brother of Pallas, who, by his brother's influence, had risen from a slave to be Procurator of Judæa, and the husband, or lover, of three queens. Simon had now come to Rome to push his fortunes, and his keen eye had caught sight of the Apostle in the streets. He had set a savage dog upon him, which instantly became gentle when the Apostle laid his hand upon its head. He was afraid of his counter-influence, and still remembered with burning wrath the old days when Peter, shaming him before his Samaritan votaries, had overwhelmed him with the apostrophe, 'Thy money perish with thee!' He gave immediate notice to Tigellinus that the leading Christian was in Rome. He felt more secure in his attempted miracles and professed inspiration, when Peter was in prison, and he was left unchecked to dupe the Emperor or the gullible women of the Roman aristocracy.

That evening there was a little meeting of Jewish Christians

who had met together in the house of Rufus and Alexander, sons of Simon of Cyrene, to eat the Supper of the Lord. The meeting was surprised, and many were thrown into bonds. But Rufus, at the first sound of alarm, hurried the Apostle to his lodging by a path at the back of the house. Before they reached it, Miriam's son, Nazarius, a bright and active boy, met them with the warning that his mother's house had been seized; but that Plautilla and Petronilla, being unknown, had taken refuge in the house of the Samaritan Thallus. The weeping Christians entreated Peter to fly from Rome while there yet was time: for the brethren at Rome he could do nothing more; to stay among them meant death, and his life was sorely needed by the Church of God. Overcome by their entreaties, and those of his wife and daughter, he started at the grey dawn with the young Nazarius for his guide, and proceeded about two miles on the Appian Way. There, as Nazarius afterwards described the scene, a light seemed to shine round them; the Apostle stopped as if amazed, fell on his knees with uplifted hands, spoke earnest words, and then, with wet eyes, said, 'We must return, my boy. It is the will of Christ.' To him he said no more; but he afterwards told his fellow-Apostle that (near the spot where now stands the little church of '*Domine quo vadis*'?) he had seen a vision of Christ walking towards Rome, and bearing His Cross. 'Whither goest thou, Lord?' he asked, in amazement. 'I go to Rome,' He said, 'to be crucified again.' 'Lord, I return,' said the Apostle, 'to be crucified with Thee.' And the Vision smiled upon him, and vanished.

So Peter went back with the boy to the house of Thallus, and next day began to visit the prisons once more. Seeking for Miriam to console her, and tell her of the safety of her son, he found that she was a prisoner. He had hardly entered the first dungeon when he was roughly arrested, and carried off to the rock-hewn Tullianum. He was chained to the floor beside his brother-Apostle John, in that damp and dreary vault. There King Jugurtha, before he was strangled, had complained so bitterly of the cold; there the brave Gaulish patriot, Vercingetorix, had been led aside from Julius Cæsar's triumph to pay the forfeit of his life; there the Catilinarian conspirators, Lentulus and Cethegus, had expiated their crimes. Fervently did the Apostles embrace one

another, and between the two there blossomed up reminiscences of early days, infinitely tender and sacred. They talked of the summer hours when they had played in boyhood on the strip of silver sand beside the limpid lake at Bethsaida; of the fisherboats, and draughts of fish, and straining nets, in the years when they were partners together; of bright Capernaum, with its marble synagogue, throwing its white reflection on the waves lit with the rose of eventide; of the green hills beyond, with the naked demoniacs among the tombs. Then they spoke of the time when they had gone with Andrew and Nathanael to see the prophet of the wilderness, whose notes of warning had made the flinty echoes ring with the preaching of repentance. Then, with hushed voices, in regions of sacred thought where we may not follow them, they spoke of the days of the Son of Man.

They who looked down into that vault from the upper aperture would have seen a rocky chamber, lighted only by one iron lamp, bare of all but the merest necessaries. The prisoners had nothing but a water jar, and two wooden seats, and mats upon the rocky floor, on which at night they could stretch their cramped and wearied limbs, and which Pomponia had bribed the jailor for permission to supply. And in this cell would have been seen two men of Jewish aspect and poor clothing, of whom the elder had exceeded man's threescore years and ten, and the younger was long past life's prime. Chilly, and in chains, and fed only on bread and water, and the leaders of a cause on which the world poured its most passionate execration they yet felt perfect trust in God. With Emperor and mob alike arrayed against them, and with hundreds of their brethren in the same evil case, and with death in its ghastliest form striding visibly upon them, amid what looked like the extreme of uttermost failure — might not even their enemies have pitied them? Pity? Nay, Nero might have given all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory of them, and Seneca have bartered all his wisdom and his wealth, for one hour of their radiant serenity, of their unshaken peace!

In the evening the jailor, Martinianus — who had been so much touched by their bearing, and by all that he had heard from them as they talked, that he was already in heart almost a Christian — came full of sorrow, to tell them that

on the morrow they should die. To his amazement a light as of heaven dawned upon their faces, and they turned and looked on each other with a smile. They asked him in what way they were to suffer. He either was uninformed or shrank from telling them, and they were content that the morrow should reveal it.

'I knew it, my brother, I knew it,' said Peter. 'Again and again a Voice has repeated in my dreams, "Verily I say to thee, When thou wast young thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest; but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not." And I am not troubled that I know not yet by what death I shall glorify God. But thou, my brother, shalt not die yet.'

'How that may be I know not,' replied the other, deeply musing. 'But to us to live is to die. Said He not, "He who is near Me is near the fire; he who is far from Me is far from the kingdom"?'

The jailer had told them truly. The execution of the Christians was to be hurried on with all speed, for Nero had on hand the weighty business of supervising the reconstruction of his capital and of his Golden House. He could only recover the popularity necessary for these undertakings by sacrificing a holocaust of victims to assuage the popular suspicions. And the most diabolic feature of this massacre of the innocent was to be that they were not only to be slain, but that their tortures were to subserve the amusement of the people. The solemn moment of each Christian's death was to be the motive for delighted acclamations and shouts of laughter — in which, surely, all the demons joined! To any feelings less exalted, to any hope less fervent than theirs, it would have been the most intolerable aggravation to die amid pagan pageants and brutal idleness, insulted by bacchanalia of revelry and sanguinary pomp.

But the inventiveness of cruelty which Tigellinus and Nero studied and planned together amid the faint, unavailing remonstrances of Poppæa, had to be hastened, for the special reason that already their victims were beginning to escape them fast through the narrow gate of death. Owing to the suffocating atmosphere of over-peopled prisons in the malarious autumn air, a dangerous form of typhoid had broken out

among the Christians. Not a few had died, robbed, as they feared, of the crown of martyrdom. It had required all the wisdom and tenderness of their fellows to persuade them that they had deserved no less than others the longed-for amaranth, and that they would not be losers by not surviving until that second coming which many of them were expecting from hour to hour. Tigellinus was not more anxious to bestow than they to receive the death of violence. All Nero's aims would be frustrated, if, with so great a multitude of victims ready for them, the wild beasts of the amphitheatre, human as well as animal, were baulked of their infernal festival and their infernal joy.

Pending, therefore, the necessary preparations to deal with the rest in mass, bizarre and insulting forms of death were devised for the leaders on the following day. Notice was given that of the two Jewish ringleaders of the Christian sect, whom they called Apostles, one would be crucified head downwards by the obelisk in the Circus on the Mons Vaticanus, under the terebinth tree, and that the other would be flung into a caldron of boiling oil on the Latin Road.

And that night a great joy was permitted them. They had noticed that again and again Martinianus had not only shown them kindnesses to which the prisoners of the Tullianum were little accustomed, but also that he had humbly lingered in their presence, had asked permission to listen to them when they spake of Jesus, had put many questions to them, had evidently felt in his heart some stirrings of heavenly grace. That night he came to them, and, falling on his knees, said that they had taught him to believe in Christ, and begged baptism at their hands. The spring was there welling up, as it still does, from its native rock. Nothing hindered. Martinianus received baptism at the hands of the Apostles, and afterwards died a martyr.

The morning dawned sulphurously hot, and there seemed to be menace and meaning in the sky which glowed overhead like molten copper. At the entrance of the Tullian vault the Apostles enfolded one another in a long farewell embrace. They reminded each other, with faces which smiled through the tears of parting, of the blessings and words of Christ, and, being then rudely separated, were led in opposite directions by two decurions with their soldiers, amid accompanying throngs.

The places of execution had been fixed in order that spectators might have their free choice of delightful horror, and that the division of the multitudes might enable all to have a good view.

A fresh trial awaited the elder Apostle. He had hardly been set free from his chains, that he might walk to the place of execution with his hands tied behind his back, when he saw his wife, who was also being led on her way to die. Brief, and free from all anguish, were the words that they interchanged.

'Be of good cheer,' he said, 'true yokefellow. He will be with thee who raised thy mother from the great fever at Capernaum. I rejoice that thou, too, art going home.'

'Farewell, my beloved,' she replied, in a firm voice; 'I am not afraid. In one short hour we shall be with Him where He is.'

He cast one long look upon her, and said in Hebrew, 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.' And when they were parted he still turned round to her once more, and said, 'Oh, remember the Lord!'

Most of the spectators who accompanied the procession had seen the then common spectacle of crucifixion; but to see a man crucified head downwards was a novelty sufficient to have assembled all the dregs of the populace, but for the counter-attraction at what, for the sake of brevity, we will call the Latin Gate.[1] In point of fact, Nero had read in Seneca's 'Consolation to Marcia'[2] that tyrants had been known to adopt this grotesque form of cruelty, and he himself suggested it to Tigellinus, and said that he meant to witness it. When St. Peter was told what awaited him, he only smiled. He well knew that what had been intended for insult was overruled to him for mercy. He would be spared the long unspeakable pangs of lingering death. On the ordinary cross he might have lived for three days in complications of agony, but crucified head downwards, he knew that in a very short time he would pass from unconsciousness to death.

[1] The Latin Gate did not at this time exist. It was in the wall of Aurelian, of which the date is A.D. 271. But it is possible that tradition may have had reason for fixing on this locality.

[2] Sen. *Consol. ad Marc.* 20.

Nero, as he had promised, was present to see the new sight. While the cross was being prepared, Peter caught sight of the Emperor, and lifting the right hand, which for a moment the executioner had loosened, fixed his gaze on him till he shrank.

He spoke not, but one of the Christians, who had noticed the Emperor's alarm, exclaimed —

'O murderer of the saints, yet a little time hence, and thou, too, shalt be summoned before the bar of God.'

'Crucify him!' said Nero, passionately. 'Stop his ill-omened and blaspheming mouth!'

But the speaker had shrunk back into the dense multitude.

They nailed St. Peter to the cross, and lifted it with his head downwards; but while the brutal heathen laughed, and the fear of death could not suppress the wail of the Christians, he said only — and they were the last words of the great Apostle — 'I rejoice that ye crucify me thus, for my Master's sake. I am much unworthy to die in the same manner as He died.'

The old man passed speedily and almost painlessly away, and in the glimmering, flashing sky, over which, in the far distance, began to roll the chariot wheels of gathering storm, the brethren thought that they saw the wings of angels and shadows of the avengers.

The Christians always perplexed and irritated their pagan persecutors by behaving in a manner the very opposite to what was expected. After their first shuddering emotion at witnessing the martyrdom of their great Apostle, they seemed rather radiant than depressed. But the reason for this was that their young deacon, Clemens, speaking to them in Greek, said, 'I see him, not head downwards, but upright on the cross, and the angels crown him with roses and lilies, and the Lord is putting a book into his hands from which he reads.'

It was natural that they should desire to keep his mortal remains. Marcellus, who had been a pupil of Simon Magus, but whom Peter had converted, obtained his body from the executioner for a great sum of money, bathed it in milk and wine, and had it embalmed. That night they conveyed it to a spot, secretly remembered, at the foot of the Vatican hill

Marcellus watched by the grave that night; but as he watched he thought that the Apostle came to him in vision, and said, 'Let the dead bury their dead. Preach thou the gospel of God.' On that spot was reared the humble 'trophy,' or memorial cell, which the presbyter Gaius saw there in the second century. Thence, in due time, the relics were removed to that unequalled shrine, where the tomb which enclosed them is encircled by ever-burning lights, and visited century after century by the devotion of tens of thousands. Fools counted his life madness and his end to be without honour. Now is he numbered among the children of God, and his lot is among the saints!

The procession which accompanied the Apostle John had taken longer to arrive at the scene of martyrdom. The awful heat of the morning, the more crowded parts of the city through which they had to pass, the greater throngs which accompanied them, had caused delay. The Apostle walked with firm step in the midst of the ten soldiers. Though his hands were tied behind his back, his appearance struck all beholders with involuntary dread. The high forehead, the long hair which streamed over his shoulders, the perfect self-possession, the beauty of holiness, gave to his movements an unconscious majesty. His face was mostly lifted heavenward in prayer, but whenever he turned on those around him his bright and searching glance their eyes fell before him. If any began to jeer at him and utter words of ribald blasphemy, he had but to look towards them, and in spite of themselves they stopped short. An unwonted hush fell on the throng which surged around the soldiers - a silence of which the multitudes themselves could give no account.

'He is a sorcerer, that is certain,' said Tullius Senecio as he looked down on the passing procession from a window in the house of Crispinilla.

'He must be,' she answered. 'I never saw the crowd of the Forum so strangely quiet.'

'Let me see the Christian,' said a boy in the crowd. 'Soldier, lift me up that I may see him.'

'What, Gervasius? How camest thou here? But thou art a soldier's son, and I will humour thee,' said the decurio. 'Thy father and I were comrades in Palestine, and

it was once his lot to see a scene after which he never had one happy day.'

He lifted the boy in his arms, and he gazed long.

'Is that the Christian?' he said. 'You man does not look like an enemy of the gods, or an eater of children's flesh.'

The Apostle heard him, and turned towards him with a soft light of blessing in his eyes.

'I should not mind being like thee,' said the boy, 'and I will not go to see thee killed.'

Fifty years later he remembered that gentle glance when in a later persecution he, too, was led out to die.

At the scene of execution a high scaffolding had been erected so that many thousands could be gratified by witnessing the new form of death. On the summit, on ten rows of bricks, had been kindled a fire, and over this was placed a huge caldron of iron, full of boiling oil. Not blenching in a single feature, with a step of perfect dignity, without assistance, without the slightest tremor, the Apostle mounted the wooden steps and stood in the sight of all, the fire flinging its red glare over him as the executioner tore off his outer robe.

But meanwhile the storm, gathering into its bosom the fierce heat of that day in late August, had begun to burst over Rome. The thunderclouds passed from threatening purple into midnight blackness, and roll after roll of thunder throbbed and crashed as though to menace the guilty city with the doom of its congregated iniquity. Then blazed forth the lightning, and filled the air, and ran along the ground. So tremendous were the explosions of sound, whose rending, cracking, and splitting outbursts settled into a long, continued roar, and so vivid were the flashes of forked lightning which gleamed like dazzling dagger-stabs aimed at an enemy who must at all costs be slain, that the soldiers and the executioners and the spectators grew livid with dread. Women shrieked and cowered, and clung to their husbands, and men looked round them uneasily, and some began to hurry away, and the hearts of all were benumbed as with some strange misgiving.

An exceptionally terrific crash of the artillery of heaven, a flash of levin which seemed to wrap them all in a white robe of dazzling flame, a shriek from hundreds of voices! And

when the crash ended, the Christians were murmuring together in awestruck voices, *Maranatha ! Maranatha !* and there arose scattered cries from the multitude. 'He is a sorcerer! Stay the execution! We are all dead men! The wrath of the gods is upon us!' The ancients, from ignorance combined with superstition, were far more terrified than the moderns by thunderstorms. It was evident that they were in the centre of the storm. The scaffold and the caldron formed its inmost focus, having attracted the electric fluid by their woodwork and iron. The decurion himself and his soldiers and the executioners were terrified. They dared not disobey their orders, yet amid the general terror they seemed paralysed into helplessness. Aliturus, hoping that he might in some way render some kindness, had asked to be one of those spectators, of higher position than the mob, who were allowed to stand on the scaffold. Seizing his opportunity, he hastily whispered, 'The executioner has untied your hands. You have friends in the crowd. Escape! Fear not the lightning — this skin of a seal which I brought under my robe, expecting a thunderstorm, is an amulet against lightning.'

'I thank thee, my son,' said the Apostle; 'unless the will of God be clearly manifested, I cannot fly. And if we trust in God we need no amulet, for neither the pestilence nor the arrow can hurt us.'

Again the thunder roared, again they were wrapped in a blinding flash. Hardly conscious what he did, the Apostle uplifted his right hand. It became the nucleus of the electric phenomenon known as St. Elmo's fire, and at once appeared to burn like a torch with lambent flame. A cry of fresh terror rose from the heathen multitude. 'Fly, fly!' they exclaimed; 'he is a sorcerer or a god. He lifts against us his flaming hand, tipped with the fire of Castor and Pollux. We shall all be killed by fire from heaven. The spot is accursed. It is a *bidental*.'[1]

A rush took place, and the crowd fled promiscuously in every direction. The soldiers could not resist the contagion. They leapt down and fled, and the decurio followed, shouting to them in vain. The executioners joined the soldiers in their flight. For a moment the Apostle and

[1] Note 46.

Aliturus stood alone on the scaffold, and then hurried down the steps. Scarcely had they reached the ground when the lightning struck the metal caldron and tore it from its chains. It fell with a mighty crash, and the oil streaming over the flame burst up in a fierce blaze which would very rapidly have reduced the whole scaffold to ashes had not the deluging rain begun to fall in cataracts, quenching the fire, but leaving a charred and shapeless ruin.

The news was brought to Nero and Tigellinus that evening by multitudes of witnesses when the storm had cleared and the heavens had resumed their azure sleep. They shared the superstition of the mob, and thought that, by magic powers unusually terrible, the Apostle had brought down the wrath of Heaven. At the same time this could have nothing to do with the Christians in general, for had not the execution of the other Apostle been carried out with perfect ease? They were officially informed that the Apostle, of his own free will, had thought it right to return to the door of the Tullianum and surrender himself as a prisoner. Such strange security deepened the impression that he could wield supernatural powers. Afraid to detain him in Rome, Nero ordered him to banishment in the rocky Ægean island of Patmos.[1]

Thither the Apostle was conveyed, and there, gazing on the sea that burned like glass in the sunlight, he wrote his Apocalypse. In that strange book we can still read the echo of the horror kindled in the heart of an eyewitness by an Emperor who had degenerated into a portent of iniquity, fighting with empoisoned breath and dragon-like fury against the saints of God. The Apocalypse is the 'thundering reverberation' of the Apostle's mighty spirit, smitten into wrathful dissonance amid its heavenly music by the plectrum of the Neronian persecution. All the horrors of that frightful age of storms, and eruptions, and earthquakes, and falling meteors, and famine, and pestilence, and threatenings of Parthian invasion and imminent massacres of civil war, threw gigantic and blood-red shadows across the Apostle's page. The air was being shattered by the trumpet-blasts of doom which would bury in flame and ruin alike the Harlot City on the seven hills which had made herself so drunken with the blood

[1] Note 47. — St. John banished by Nero.

of the saints, and the Holy City which had become a den of murderers — which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt — where the Lord was crucified. When he wrote his vision, three or four years later, the souls of those who had been slain in the great Neronian tribulation for the Word of God and the testimony which they held were still under the altar, and cried, 'How long, O Lord, how long dost thou not avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?' But white robes were given them, and they were bidden to rest yet a little while till the number of their brethren was fulfilled. And afterwards one of the four-and-twenty elders who sat around the throne asked him, 'Who are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?' And he said unto him, 'Sir, thou knowest.' And the Elder answered, 'These are they which came out of THE GREAT TRIBULATION, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

CHAPTER LVI

LIVING TORCHES

'Ο νειδισμοῖς τε καὶ θλίψεσι θεατριζόμενοι. — Hebr. x. 33.

'Sec. Br. O night and shades!
How are ye joined with hell in triple knot.
. . . . . .
Is this the confidence
You gave me, brother?
Eld. Br. Yes, and keep it still.
. . . . . .
If this fail
The pillared firmament is rottenness,
And earth's base built on stubble.'

Milton, *Comus.*

The news of the Neronian persecution did not reach St. Paul at once. When he left the hospitable home of Philemon he first rejoined Timothy at Ephesus. He left him to arrange the affairs of the Church of Ephesus, and Onesimus took the place which had been filled by the son of Eunice in former years. He became the Apostle's travelling companion, to lend him the affectionate attendance now necessary to his age and infirmities. It was not till they reached Corinth that they heard the heart-shaking intelligence that the Christian Church at Rome had been smitten by Antichrist as with red-hot thunderbolts. Though no accurate details reached them, Paul's first impulse was to fly to the succour of his Roman brethren; but Titus of Corinth, who was with him, urged him to remember that two of his brother Apostles were at Rome; that the persecution was now certain to break out in nearly every Church of the Empire, and that his presence was more needed in Crete and in the Churches of Asia and Europe of which he had been the immediate founder. Anxious to confront the growth of subtle heresies, more perilous in his eyes than persecution, he reluctantly abandoned his wish to return to Italy, and sailed to Crete. It was some time before he

learnt that St. Peter had sealed his testimony by martyrdom and that St. John was a prisoner at Patmos.

But Onesimus was distressed at heart by the perils which would befall the beloved daughter of Nereus, and he entreated the Apostle to let him be the bearer to Rome of his messages of consolation and encouragement. Receiving ready permission, he hurried to the capital by the earliest ship, and arrived on the very day of the storm which had witnessed the crucifixion of St. Peter and the miraculous deliverance of the Beloved Disciple.

With amazement he saw Rome lying in ruins and the Christian cause apparently destroyed forever. 'Christian' was now the synonym of incendiary and desperate malefactor. His heart sank within him as he went from house to house only to find that the Christian inhabitants had disappeared. So great a multitude had been arrested that for the time being the prisons were the only churches. He went to the palace of Aulus Plautius, thinking that there he was certain to receive information; but there, too, he found that scarcely one of the Christian slaves was left, and that Pomponia herself had caught the virulent typhoid which had broken out among the crowded sufferers, and lay unconscious and dangerously ill.

Risking everything, he visited the prisons, and in one of them he found Nereus, wasted and haggard, but still animated by a cheerful courage. From him he learnt, with a deep sense of relief, that at the first outbreak of danger he had sent Junia to the safe refuge of Aricia. Pudens, when he sailed for Britain, felt a prescient intuition of the days which were to come, and told the Christian members of his household that they might always find a place of shelter with Dromo in the little country farm. Thither Junia had gone with a few others, obedient to the wish and command of her father, though reluctant to leave him. There Onesimus found her, and carried to her the blessing and the messages of Nereus. Nereus sent her word that he was doomed to die, as they were all doomed to die, though by what form of death was as yet unknown to them. He bade her to stay at Aricia. She could do nothing for him, and to come to Rome would only be to throw away her life. In the few lines he was able to write to her he commended Onesimus. He confessed that in former

days the youth had been altogether displeasing to him, but now he was a changed character. Paulus had won him back to the paths of holiness. He had been illuminated. He had tasted of the heavenly calling, and had devoted himself to the personal tendance of the aged Apostle. In Rome he had given proof of his courage and consistency by showing pity for the prisoners and not being ashamed of their chains. It was no time now to talk of marrying or giving in marriage, for surely the day of the Lord was very nigh at hand; yet, if Junia loved the youth, Nereus would not forbid their plighting troth to each other, and awaiting the day when the marriage might be possible. And this he granted the more readily, for he feared that very soon Junia would be left alone, a helpless and friendless Christian maiden in the midst of an evil world.

So the lovers met, but the interchange of their common vows were solemn and sacred, under the darkening skies of persecution, and as it were in the valley of the shadow of death. For Junia entreated Onesimus to return to Rome and do his utmost to watch over her father and to save him if by any means it were possible or lawful. He bade her farewell, and found time to pay one brief visit to the temple at Aricia that he might express his gratitude to the priests of Virbius for having spared his life. Alas, he was too late! A new Rex Nemorensis — the ex-gladiator Rutilus — reigned in Croto's room. He had surprised and murdered him the evening before, and Onesimus saw the gaunt corpse of Croto outstretched upon its wooden bier awaiting burial in the plot assigned to the succession of murdered priests.

Sick at heart, Onesimus hurried from the dark precincts, and by the morning dawn he was in Rome.

On that day the terrible massacres began which were to baptise the infant Church in a river of blood, and to consecrate Rome in the memory of Christendom as the city of slaughtered saints. For there Paganism was to display herself, naked and not ashamed, a harlot holding in her hand the brimming goblet of her wickedness, drunken with the blood of the beloved of God. Mankind was to see exhibited a series of startling contrasts: human nature at its best and sweetest; human nature at its vilest and worst: — unchecked power smitten with fatal impotence; unarmed weakness

clothed with irresistible strength: — pleasure and self-indulgence drowned in wretchedness; misery and martyrdom exulting with joy unspeakable, and full of glory. On the one side was the splendour and civilisation of the City of the Dragon revelling in brutal ferocity and lascivious pride; on the other side the down-trodden and the despised of the City of God rose to a height of nobleness which no philosophy had attained, and enriched with sovereign virtues the ideal of mankind. While the deified lord of the empire of darkness with his nobles and his myrmidons sank themselves below the level of the beasts, paupers and nameless slaves, young boys and feeble girls towered into tragic dignity, faced death with unflinching heroism, and showed that even amid satyrs and demons humanity may still be measured with the measure of a man — that is, of the angel.

Herein lay the secret of the victory of Christianity. In the Rome of Nero heathendom showed the worst that she could *be*, and the worst that she could *do;* and Christianity showed, coinstantaneously, that manhood can preserve its inherent grandeur when it seems to be trampled into the very mire under the hoofs of swine. The sweetness and the dignity with which the Christians suffered kindled not only amazement but admiration in many a pagan breast. It was seen that with the Church in its poverty and shame, not with the world in its gorgeous criminality, lay the secret of all man's happiness and hope. Many a senator, as he looked on the saturnalia of lubricity and blood, felt that the Christian slave-girl, tied naked to a stake in the amphitheatre for the wild beasts to devour, was more blessed than the jewelled lady by his side, whom he knew to be steeped in baseness; and there were youths to whose taste the apples of the Dead Sea had already crumbled into dust, who in their secret hearts felt themselves nothing less than abject compared with those Christian boys who, with the light of heaven on their foreheads and the name of Jesus on their lips, faced without flinching the grotesque horror of their doom.

But Nero and Tigellinus, and those who advised with them, never wavered in their hideous policy of purchasing popularity by making the murder of thousands of the innocent subserve the brutal passions of the multitude. They thought to abase the Christians, and they kindled round their

brows an aureole of light. They thought to flatter the people, but made them vile by a carnival which showed that their natures had become a mixture of the tiger and the ape.

The jubilee of massacre began with cruel flagellations, for the intention was to combine amusement with utility and to represent these unnumbered agonies as a festival of expiation. So low had the Romans sunk since the days when they had believed that the wrath of the gods had been kindled because before some public games a master had scourged his slave round the arena!

As they wished to add derision to torture, it did not suffice them that at these piacular displays men should merely fight with wild beasts who would soon be glutted with the multitude of victims. A novelty was devised for the delight of the spectators.

The first batch of martyrs were clad in the skins of wolves and leopards and torn to death by hordes of fierce and hungry dogs.

Others had to take part in mythologic operas. Among them was the soldier Urbanus. Clad in the guise of Hercules on Œta, he was burned alive upon a funeral pyre. Another martyr, Celsus, had to figure as Mucius Scævola, and to burn his hand to ashes in a flame upon an altar, with the promise that his life should be given him if, in carrying out his historic rôle, he would voluntarily consume his right hand, and not once shrink. Vitalis had to take his part in the favourite drama of Laureolus, in which character, after being made a laughing-stock, he was first crucified, and then, while yet living, devoured upon the cross by a bear. It was thought a favourable opportunity to try experiments. Simon Magus, after securing the arrest of Peter, had been admitted to an interview with Poppæa, whose superstitious turn of mind inclined her to consult every charlatan who visited the capital, and through her he gained admittance to the Emperor. He awakened Nero's interest in a machine by which he pretended that he could enable men to fly. Nero determined to test the capabilities of the machine *in corpore vili*. The story of Dædalus and Icarus should be enacted, and as a slim and graceful youth was needed for the part of Icarus, poor Nazarius, the son of Miriam, was selected for this character. A lofty wooden tower was erected in the mimic scene. The wild

beasts were roaming loose in the amphitheatre, and if either Dædalus or Icarus was not killed by a fall from the tower, he would be devoured in the arena. The martyr Amplias, who represented Dædalus, was precipitated at once, and killed by a lion. The broad wings of the machine upbore for a moment the light form of Nazarius as he sprang from the tower, but he fell on the very podium of the Emperor, and so close beside him that, to the horror of all, and with an omen of the worst import, he spattered the white robe of Nero with his blood.[1]

Unsated by these scenes the spectators demanded the sacrifice of the women victims. Hundreds of them were crowded in cells under the amphitheatre, and were informed that they were to appear in a series of pageants representing the torments of the dead. The spectacle was deemed impious by many, but it had been exhibited by Egyptians and Ethiopians in the days of Caligula. Fifty of these poor female martyrs were to be clothed in scarlet mantles as the daughters of Danaus, and, after undergoing nameless insults, were to be stabbed by an actor who personated Lynceus.[2] To many of them it was an anguish worse than death that they should have to bear part in dramas which represented the idolatries of heathendom ; but Prisca, the wife of Aquila, who had returned from Ephesus to Rome with her husband on matters connected with their trade, visited the sufferers in prison, and effectually consoled them. This Jewish matron, to whom with her husband had been granted the honour of no inconspicuous share in the founding of the three great churches of Rome, of Corinth, and of Ephesus, had not been arrested by any informer, owing to long residence in Achaia and Asia. She told the poor women that resistance was in vain, and that no insult inflicted on them by the heathen could dim the lustre of their martyr-crown. Cheered by her calm wisdom, they paced across the stage carrying vases on their shoulders, and bore their fate without a cry.

More terrible was the destiny of others. They were to enact the part of Dirce. One after another, in imitation of the much-admired statue now known as the Farnese Bull, which had recently been brought from Rhodes, they were tied by actors representing Amphion and Zethus, to the horns of

[1] Note 48.— Icarus. [2] Note 49.— Danaides.

furious oxen, and so were tossed or gored to death. They, too, were sustained by the presence of the Invisible, and the modesty of their bearing, even in such agonies, caused a pang in the hearts of all but the most hardened spectators.

At all these spectacles of shame Nero looked on. There he sat day after day in the podium, lolling on cushions of gold and purple, staring through the concave emerald which helped his short-sightedness, and finding new sensations in the spectacle of insulted innocence. He was never tired of wondering whence these wretches got their 'blank callosity.' And they, ere their eyes opened on that other land, where they knew they should gaze upon their King in His beauty, saw as their last glimpse of earth, this despicable Antichrist, with his face like that of a base overgrown boy, watching with greedily curious stare the agony of their immolation.

But there were too many martyrs to render it easy to dispose of them. After they had exhausted the inventiveness of cruelty, after they had heaped up the *puticuli* even to the danger of pestilence with crucified, charred, and mangled corpses, at least a thousand of the great multitude still rotted in the feverous prisons. Then an idea truly infernal presented itself to the mind of Nero. Were not these masses of human beings supposed to be expiating their crimes as incendiaries? But the proper and congruous punishment of incendiaries was the *tunica molesta*, or robe of pitch. He wondered that he had never thought of it before! It would, indeed, be somewhat tame merely to burn alive a certain number of people in succession. At first there might be an agreeable sense of curiosity in studying the faces of men and women in such circumstances, and in hearing their groans and cries. But after watching the first dozen or so, that pleasure would grow monotonous. He determined to prevent the danger of any satiety in the gratification by concentrating it all into one hour of multiplex and complicated agony.

He possessed magnificent gardens, stretching from the Vatican Hill to the Tiber. There was a circus, rich with gilding and marble, of which the *meta* was the obelisk, brought from Heliopolis, now standing in the piazza of St. Peter's. He would throw open these gardens to the public, for one of the nightly spectacles of which he had copied the

fashion from the mad Caligula. Every one should wander at will about the green copses, and the umbrageous retreats, and he would furnish them with an illumination unseen, unheard of, in the world's history before or since. It should be the illumination of a thousand living torches, of which each should be a martyr in his shirt of flame!

And it was done. Martyrdoms inflicted by wild beasts, and dogs, and gibbets, had become tedious from repetition. Here should be a new and intense sensation for himself, and for all Rome, for he would be present in person and enjoy to the full his hateful popularity. At intervals, all along the paths, masts, strong and large, were driven deep into the ground. To each of these was tied a man or a woman, who were taken in throngs from the pestilential and now emptied prisons. Each was tied to the stake, and in front of each was put a smaller stake with a sharpened point, fixed under the chin, lest their heads should sink on their breasts and baulk the festal sightseers from gloating on the expression of their dying agonies. Hundreds of Nero's slaves were at work, for the preparations had all to be begun many hours before the dusk fell. The last thing which had to be done was to saturate the robes of the martyrs with pitch and oil, and then to heap around the feet of each, as high as their waists, a mass of straw and brushwood and shavings. These balefires were not to be kindled till it was dark, in order that the world of Rome might have complete enjoyment of the pageant and look in each other's rejoicing faces by the mighty blaze.

But Onesimus had determined to do his utmost to save Nereus, if nothing else was possible. Hanging about the gardens in the dress of a slave, he managed to gain admission by the connivance of a Prætorian whom he knew to be a secret Christian. Once inside the precincts, he could easily escape detection among the hundreds who were so busily employed. Carrying now a stake, and now a bucket of pitch, and now a heap of fuel, he hurried from place to place, at each convenient moment whispering some bright message of cheer such as St. Paul had taught him, and rewarded by grateful smiles from those who were so soon to undergo their awful fate. At last he saw Nereus, who, happily for the young man's purpose, had been fastened to a stake at the end of one of the remoter alleys. Nereus, deep

in prayer, and dead to the things of earth, did not recognise him, but started when he heard a voice whispering to him that he should attempt to secure his escape.

'It is impossible,' said Nereus. 'I am more than ready to share the fate of my comrades, and to win their crown.'

'Nay, father,' said Onesimus, 'think of Junia, who, if thou diest, will be left a helpless orphan in the world. I dare speak no more, but be ready to fly in one instant behind yonder shrine, if I am able to set thee free.'

Reconnoitring the ground, Onesimus observed that the green alley where Nereus was tied was close beside a wall. At no great distance beyond the wall he knew that there was one of the corpse-pits into which were thrown the bodies of the poor. Gliding about, he saw on the ground a basket containing a hammer and large nails. He snatched it up, and, hid from observation behind the tangled masses of rank foliage at the back of a shrine of Priapus, he drove the nails one over the other between the huge disjointed stones, so as to make it easy to climb the wall. Then he awaited his opportunity, which he knew would be when the crowd of more than a hundred thousand spectators pushed and crowded into the gardens, and the fires of death began.

He was right in all his calculations. A scene of tumultuous excitement, and the hoarse murmur of innumerable voices, greeted the almost simultaneous kindling of many of the stakes. At that very moment, before the executioners had reached the end of the alley, Onesimus, gliding behind Nereus, cut his thongs, slipped the chain over his head, tore off the pitchy outer robe, and hurrying the old man to the back of the shrine of Priapus, half dragged him up the wall, and took refuge in the dense gloom of a subterranean passage in the dreadful burial-place.

The executioners noticed, of course, that one of their victims had, by some strange unknown means, escaped; but it did not greatly concern them. One simply whispered to the other, 'It will not be observed. Let the poor cacodæmon get off. What matters it to us?'

Meanwhile on every side the flames shot up around the stakes, and glared with hideous brightness, and sent up huge tongues of waving light, and each stake became a torch of hell, and black smoke swirled around them, and groans and

cries of anguish arose which were drowned in bursts of music and laughter and ribald songs. And all the while the moon was silvering the rich foliage, and the stars shone down with peaceful rays over that revelry of hell, and the smoke and flame were to those poor sufferers as chariots of fire and horses of fire to bear their souls to heaven. And while the agony and madness and hilarity were at their height, and the statues of obscene gods and lascivious nymphs, which glimmered from beneath the trees, looked like demons over whose faces the red glow flickered in smiles of seeming ecstasy as they watched this triumph of demoniac wickedness — at this moment shouts of adulation arose, and Nero was seen, his face wreathed in smiles, in the dress of a charioteer. With some of his basest creatures round him, he mingled familiarly with the mob, exchanged jokes with them, and stood peering with them into the ghastly faces in which flickered longest the gleam of life.

'What think you of these *sarmenticii*, these *semaxii?*' he asked repeatedly of the plebeian throng.

'Call us "faggot-birds," and "stake-fellows,"' said one of the martyrs, who calmly awaited the rekindling of his stake from which, by some chance, the flame had expired. 'These faggots with which we are burned, these stakes to which we are bound, are our robes of victory, our triumphant chariot.' [1]

'Child of the Devil,' exclaimed another, before his robe had caught the flames, 'I would not, even at this moment, change my lot with thine.'

'Antichrist,' murmured another, 'thine hour is nigh.'

Nero shrank before the prophecy, but afterwards sprang upon his chariot, and seeking the applause which rose like a storm wherever he appeared, drove his four horses round every part of the circus, and the broad paths of the gardens, until the last human torch had flared out, and the multitude began to stream away.

It was an amazing thing that pagan fathers and mothers should have taken even their children to see such sights as these. But, inured as they were to blood and anguish by the harrowing homicides of the amphitheatre, their hearts in these matters were 'brazed by damned custom.' And so it hap-

[1] Tert. *Apol.* 50. Note 50.

pened that a Roman knight named Cornelius Tacitus had led his little son, a grave child of eight years old, to walk through the gardens of Nero on that awful night. He looked on the scene with an impulse of childish pity, and asked his father 'whether these Christians had really set fire to Rome.'

'Perhaps not,' said his father.

'Why, then, are they burnt alive?' he asked.

'They are criminals,' said the knight; 'and they hate the whole human race. They are akin to the Jews, and it would be no bad thing for the Empire if both of those accursed superstitions were destroyed.'

The young Tacitus remembered and recorded the remark more than thirty years later, when he had become a great historian. He was influenced, too, by the conversation which he then heard between his father and the friends who accompanied him. 'These men,' said one of them, 'die every whit as bravely as the Stoics whom we so greatly admire.' But the elder Tacitus would not admit the analogy. 'In these Christians,' he said, 'the contempt of death is mere custom, or madness, or sheer obstinacy.'

Seneca, too, was in those gardens of the Vatican for a few moments, perplexed, horrified, miserable. The Emperor had commanded his presence, as though it would lend some sanction to the carnival of horror. The agonising deaths of such a multitude were indeed, to him, a repulsive sight, but it was not so wholly unfamiliar as to harrow his feelings to their depths. What struck him most, and what he has dwelt upon in his obvious allusions to this monstrous execution, was the inexplicable fortitude, the unflinching heroism, shown, not by nobles and philosophers, but by slaves, and women, and boys, and the very dregs of the populace. He pondered in vain over that disturbing problem.[1]

Before an hour had passed, the stakes stood charred and black, and underneath them were horrible heaps of death, still keeping some awful semblance of humanity; and the smoke curled and writhed about them, and streams of the

[1] Sen. *Ep.* 15, 78.

melted and bubbling pitch quivered with small blue flames, or left black furrows on the burnt grass or the trampled sand.

And thus amid foul laughter the martyrs had died whose lives alone were innocent, who alone loved one another and all mankind. And the moon still shed her soft lustre on the scene, and the stars looked down through the untroubled night, and lighted home the myriads whose consciences, seared as with hot iron, smote them in no wise for their share in that crime — the vilest in the long annals of the world's vilest days.

The numerous and flourishing Church of Rome was all but destroyed; yet on that night the seed of her mighty power in the development of Christianity was sown afresh. Watered by the blood of the martyrs, that seed sprang into more vigorous life, and rushing sunwards, spread forth arms laden with fruit and foliage, and grew into a giant bole, strong with the rings of a thousand summers, under whose shadows and 'complicated glooms and cool impleachèd twilights,' the hopes and fears of generations found their refuge — yea! and shall find it for evermore, unless it be severed from the root, and blighted into barrenness, and the axe be uplifted and the doom go forth, 'Never fruit grow upon thee more!'

And the obelisk which witnessed that night of abomination, and which is now dedicated 'To the Unknown Martyrs,' still towers into the clear air, and on it is inscribed —

'CHRISTUS REGNAT:
FUGITE PARTES ADVERSÆ.'

And over the ground with its groves and gardens where they perished — those nameless heroes, those nameless demi-gods — rose the vast cathedral to the honour of the Christ for whom they died; and round its dome is written in huge golden letters the name of the Apostle who fell first before the wild beast's wrath: — 'I say unto thee, Thou art PETER, and on this rock will I build My Church.'

CHAPTER LVII

A CONSPIRACY AND ITS COLLAPSE

'Ma cruauté se lasse, et ne peut s'arrêter,
Je veux me faire craindre, et ne fais qu'irriter,
Et le sang répandu de mille conjurés
Rend mes jours plus maudits et non plus assurés.'

CORNEILLE, *Cinna*, iv. 2.

'Our emperor is a tyrant, fear'd and hated;
I scarce remember in his reign one day
Pass guiltless o'er his execrable head.
He thinks the sun is lost that sees not blood,
When none is shed, we count it holiday;
We who are most in favour, cannot call
This our own.'

DRYDEN, *The Cruelty of Tyranny*, v. 15–16.

THE persecution of the Christians, once begun, did not cease, but broke out again and again, in various parts of the Empire, like a conflagration which only pauses from the exhaustion of materials which it can devour. But a few more sporadic executions could furnish no further excitement to Nero, after he had supped so full of horrors. The jaded 'old man of thirty' therefore turned his whole attention to the building and embellishment of the Palace, which was not only to cover the vast area of the Domus Transitoria, but also the additional room which he had snatched from the ruins. It extended over a space equal to that covered by the Louvre and Tuileries together. It was called the Golden House, and exceeded in sumptuosity everything which the world had hitherto seen. It showed the degeneracy of taste which marked that age, by its tendency to hugeness of size and strangeness of material. Nothing but the grotesque and the enormous suited the diseased appetite of Nero. At the entrance stood a colossus of himself, of which the base is still visible, beside the Colosseum. It was a hundred and twenty feet high, and was the work of Zenodorus. Inside the hall was also a picture of

Nero, a hundred and twenty feet high, painted on linen, which was afterwards burnt up by lightning.[1] The famous architects Severus and Celer were set to work, with all the power of the Empire to back them, and all the treasures of the world at command. Triple colonnades of marble pillars led to the Palace from the vestibule, and the outer spaces of the columns were filled with statues and flowers. At the four corners of the hall, on tables of citron, of which the veins looked like curled tresses, stood huge vases of silver, embossed by Acragas, with scenes of the chase derived from the 'Cynegetica' of Xenophon. The painter Fabullus, who stood at the head of the artists of the age, was bidden to enrich the halls of audience with scenes of history and mythology. One of his paintings was a Pallas, which to the astonishment of the spectators seemed always to follow them with her eyes. The most distinguished pupils of the schools of landscape, founded by Ludius, and of the rhyparographer Pyroeicus, were set to adorn the private chambers A thousand statues of bronze, alabaster, gold, silver, and delicately tinted marble were ranged about the building, and in porticoes a thousand feet long. Not only were the old temples of Rome plundered of their treasures, but Acratus the freedman and Carinas the Greek philosopher were sent to Greece to seize whatever was most precious in her ancient cities. So shameless was the rapacity with which they served the Emperor's greed, that at Delphi — from which he carried off five hundred statues of bronze — the population rose in arms to protect the images and bas-reliefs of their temples.

The baths of alabaster, inlaid with lapis lazuli, were supplied from the Aqua Virgo, and from the sea, and from the pale sulphur-impregnated waters of the river Albula. The vaulted roof of one banquet-room was made to represent the heavens, and to revolve in imitation of the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. The roof of another, fretted with gold and ivory, was so constructed as to shower roses on the guests, or to sprinkle them with the fine dew of fragrant essences.

Nero's own bedroom was a prodigy of gorgeousness. It contained the golden statue of Victory, which spread her wings in sign of good omen over the slumbers of successive

[1] Pliny, xxxv. 33.

Cæsars. On a slab of agate stood the statuette of Nero, five inches high, armed in a corslet which had been carved with infinite labour out of hard jasper. A debased art — which did not rely for its triumph on the genius of the artist or the beauty of the result, but stimulated the languors of imagination by the conquest of apparent impossibilities — was further illustrated by other minute images cut out of emerald or topaz, like those described by Pliny. On abaci of carved ivory stood myrrhine vases — the most precious known to antiquity — red, veined, lustrous, of a value which could hardly be expressed in terms of purchase. Besides such treasures there was a little gem of sculpture, the Amazon of Strongylion, known as Eucnemos, from its exquisite proportions, which Nero took with him wherever he went. A place of special honour was assigned to Nero's harp of gold, adorned with precious stones.

Still more marvellous were the gardens. They covered a space so large that a single lake on which imperial galleys were moored, sufficed, when filled up, for the site of the Colosseum. They were full of grottoes, and gardens for exotic plants, and waterfalls shaded with masses of foliage, and pastures in which the sheep, with revolting bad taste, were dyed blue or crimson. They also contained aviaries of rare tropical birds, and dens for animals — among the rest a monster which was said to be fed with human flesh. The palace-stables of Nero's favourite horse Asturco, and of the other horses which drew his chariot, were in distant parts of these enchanting grounds, and were far more magnificent in their appointments than the houses of the poorer senators. The chief ornament of the garden was a temple of Seia, the goddess who was propitious to harvests. It was built of a newly discovered marble, so warm and glowing that, according to Pliny, it seemed rather to enclose than to transmit the light.

But the splendour with which he had surrounded himself soon became insupportably wearisome. It involved him further in pecuniary anxieties. Buoyed up for a time by the chimera of a Roman knight, who, giving credence to a dream, promised, at small expense, to discover the legendary treasures which Dido had carried with her from Troy, and which were supposed to be hidden in the caves of Carthage, he was compelled, when that bubble burst, to have recourse to expe-

dients both pitiful and violent. With great peril to himself he had to let the payments of his Prætorians fall into arrears. Instead of half the patrimony left by his freedmen, he now impropriated nine-tenths. Confiscations raged on every side. Temples were plundered, and their statues — even those of the Roman Penates — were sent to the melting-pot. A law was made against wearing amethystine colours, and once when he saw a lady with the forbidden colour at the games, he pointed her out to his Procurator, and not only inflicted the fine, but forfeited her entire property. No meanness was too base for him to practise, no wrong too cruel for him to inflict. Italy, the provinces, the allied peoples, the free states, groaned under intolerable burdens.

And while his bodily functions, disordered by riotous living, made of his life a physical burden, he was distracted by daily superstitions. In his theatric way he used to tell his intimates that he was haunted by all the Furies. His effeminated intellect was constantly unnerved by rumours of storms, and earthquakes, and strange births, and comets, which the astrologers interpreted to imply change and political disaster. A revolt of gladiators at Præneste threatened a renewal of the devastations in the days of Spartacus. In consequence of an ill-advised order of Nero, the whole fleet of triremes and smaller vessels was hopelessly shipwrecked at Misenum, and he had to bear the odium of the disaster.

While he was thus wearied and agitated, there burst upon him the immense weight of Piso's conspiracy, which afforded him a proof how many and how varied were the forces of hatred and contempt which he had kindled in the hearts of all.

Piso stood at the head of the great Calpurnian house, and was connected by ties of relationship with many of the noblest families in Rome. He was not himself the author of the conspiracy, for which, indeed, his character was altogether too unstable and corrupt. He was dragged into it by Subrius Flavus, a tribune, and Sulpicius Asper, a centurion of the Prætorian guards. Fænius Rufus, the Prætorian Præfect, approved of the plot, out of disgust for the machinations of his rival, Tigellinus, who was constantly incriminating him to the Emperor. Seneca lent a dubious sanction, which many believed to be mixed up with personal designs. Lucan was

goaded into complicity by the wrongs heaped upon him by Nero's jealousy. Perhaps the most important, courageous, and disinterested adherent was Plautius Lateranus, the consul-elect. He had no motive but a noble patriotism which felt the shame of a Roman at being governed by a histrionic debauchee. Joined to these were very unpromising elements. No credit could accrue to any cause from the support of such men as Flavius Scævinus, a man of dissolute character and slothful life; Quintianus, stained with the same vices which made Nero infamous; Senecio, a dandy long endeared to Nero by similarity of tastes; Natalis, a confidential friend of Piso, who had probably meditated treachery from the first; and Epicharis, a freedwoman of the lowest character, though for some unknown reason she proved herself the most impassioned and the most courageous of them all.

The conspiracy was revealed through the fantastic and effeminate folly of Scævinus, but not until it had left Nero almost wild with terror. Natalis, Scævinus, Quintianus, Senecio, shrinking from the thought of torture — which the poor freedwoman heroically braved, and under which she expired — turned informers. The friends of Piso strove in vain to awaken him to manly counsels. He went home, and lay hidden there till the band of tiros arrived whom Nero — distrusting the older soldiers — had sent to bid him kill himself. He opened his veins, wrote a will full of the grossest flattery to the Emperor and ignobly died.

More courageous was the death of Lateranus. When Epaphroditus came to question him, he answered: 'If I should have anything to say, I will say it to your master.' Nero did not allow him to choose his mode of death, or to embrace his children. Hurried to a place of servile execution, he maintained a disdainful silence, not even reproaching the tribune Statius, an accomplice in the conspiracy, by whose hand he was to die. He stretched out his neck without a word, and stretched it out again when the first blow failed.

Fænius Rufus did not escape. He overdid his part by trying to terrify the conspirators as he sat by Nero and Tigellinus before his own name had been denounced. It was too much to expect that among that crowd of cowards, dupes, and traitors no one would find it intolerable to have the same man as both an accomplice and inquisitor. So, as he brow-

beat and threatened Scævinus, he answered with a smile that no one knew more than Rufus himself, and urged him to show his gratitude to such an excellent Emperor. Rufus turned pale, stammered, and so completely betrayed his guilt that Nero ordered a powerful soldier to seize and bind him then and there. His death was pusillanimous. He poured his lamentations even into his will.

Subrius Flavus was the next to be betrayed. 'As if I, a soldier, could ever have undertaken such work with such helpless women as these!' he exclaimed. But, pressed with questions, he confessed and gloried in the deed.

'What made you forget your oath of allegiance to me?' asked Nero.

'Because I hated you,' he answered. 'While you were worthy to be loved, you had no more faithful soldier than myself. I began to hate you when you displayed yourself as the murderer of your mother and your wife, a jockey, a mummer, and an incendiary.'

The words struck the ears of Nero like a terrific blow. Familiar with crime, he was unaccustomed to be charged with it. Indifferent to the deeds, he shrank from the name of a criminal, and nothing in the conspiracy caused him worse pain than this. He ordered the tribune Veianus Niger to execute Flavus. To increase the terror of the condemned it was customary to dig a grave before their eyes. The grave was dug for Flavus in a field hard by. Looking at its shortness and shallowness with contempt, as at a scamped piece of work, he exclaimed with disdain, 'You cannot even do a thing like that as a soldier should.'

'Stretch out your neck manfully,' said Niger.

'Would that you would strike as manfully!' he replied.

Unwarned by the answer which he had received from Flavus, Nero, who felt himself specially injured by the defection of his soldiers, asked Sulpicius Asper also 'why he had conspired to murder him.'

'It was the only remedy left for so many infamies,' answered the centurion; and spoke no more.

After this Nero still continued to bathe in blood. The consul Vestinus was his enemy, and a man of courage, but he had not engaged in the plot. He had once been one of the Emperor's intimate circle, and Nero, who had felt

the weight of his rough wit and shrunk from its truthfulness, had cause to dread his spirit. Before the consul had been accused or even mentioned, the Emperor sent a tribune with a cohort to seize his best slaves, and take his house as it were by storm. Vestinus was giving a banquet, and when summoned by the soldiers, rose from the table without hesitation. He was immediately shut up in his chamber, his veins were opened, and, without uttering so much as a word of complaint, he was stifled in a bath. His terrified guests were meanwhile kept in their places by the soldiers, expecting that their fate would follow. It was late at night before Nero, who had secretly gloated over the imagination of their terrors, allowed them to be dismissed, with the remark that they had been sufficiently punished for their consular banquet.

Nero seized the opportunity to get rid of all who were for any reason obnoxious to him. Rufius Crispinus was banished because he had once been Poppæa's husband; Verginius, because he was an eloquent orator and instructor of youth; Musonius Rufus, because he was a genuine Stoic. There was no room for such eminence in such a Rome.

There was no room even for a Petronius Arbiter, by the side of a Tigellinus. To pagan conceptions Petronius, despite his dissolute life, was still a gentleman, and Tigellinus, whatever might be his position, was the opposite. Petronius, however vicious, was the reverse of cruel; Tigellinus, far blacker and baser in his vices, superadded to them a savage ruthlessness. It was he who developed this phase of Nero's degradation, whereas Petronius entirely disapproved of it. The Præfect felt, therefore, that Petronius must be crushed. He suborned one of the household to give false witness against him, permitted him no defence, and threw most of his slaves into chains. Petronius had left home for Campania to pay his respects to Nero. At Cumæ he was ordered to stop, and, not choosing to await the tedious delays of hope and fear, he set the example of a death as satirical as any which history records. There was nothing tragic in it, nothing remotely serious. He treated death as a jest no less contemptible than life, and died with complete coolness, effeminately brave, and sincerely frivolous. If in the deaths of some of the philosophic republicans

of that day we see the theatric pomposity of Stoicism, in that of Petronius we see the callous levity of the infidel voluptuary.

Opening his veins, he discoursed with his friends, not on high topics, but on trivial literature and *vers de société*. If he felt interested, he had his veins bound up again, and banqueted, and slept, to make his death seem a matter of freewill, not of compulsion. He had his bad slaves scourged, his good slaves rewarded. Instead of mentioning Nero and Tigellinus in his will with lying adulation, he penned a scathing satire, in which he drew a vivid picture of Nero's infamies, and sent a sealed copy of the document to the Emperor himself. Then he broke his signet ring, that it might not, after his death, be abused for purposes of forgery and delation; and dashed into shivers a myrrhine vase for which he had paid a fabulous sum, that it might not fall into Nero's hands. When Nero received his satire, he writhed under it. He could not tell how Petronius had become acquainted with some of those deeds which he had concealed in the closet and the midnight, but which were here blazoned in the noonday. Thinking that Petronius could only have learnt them from an abandoned lady, named Silia, the wife of a senator, he drove her into exile on the suspicion that she had betrayed the secrets which she had shared and witnessed. At the same time he banished the ex-Prætor Minucius Thermus, and tortured one of his freedmen, because the latter had spread similar reports about Tigellinus.

And so, day after day, 'the hard reality of death was brushed by the rustling masquerade of life,' and society presented the spectacle of a lascivious dance on the edge of a precipice, over which some dancer or some indignant spectator from hour to hour was violently hurled.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF SENECA

'Hoc inter cætera vel pessimum habet crudelitas, quod perseverandum est.' — SENECA.

THE family of Spanish Romans from Cordova of which Seneca was the head had risen to strange prosperity only to be dragged through deadlier overthrow; but the fate of their greatest scion, the poet Lucan, was the most humiliating. He might seem to have been marked out from infancy as the spoiled favourite of fortune. While little more than a boy, he had gained such a reputation for ability, that Nero had summoned him from Athens before his studies were completed. For a year or two he was the Emperor's intimate friend, and at the same time he rose to be the favourite poet and writer of the day. When he recited in the lecture-rooms he achieved an astonishing success. He was appointed augur and quæstor before the legal age, and when, as quæstor, he exhibited games to the people, he was received with thunders of applause as loud as those which had greeted Virgil in the days of Augustus. It is impossible to imagine a giddier pinnacle of temptation for a hot-blooded Spanish youth of genius, who at the age of twenty could not have been a friend and courtier of Nero without being plunged into every sort of moral temptation. Let it be remembered in Lucan's honour, that if he did not escape from that furnace unscathed — if his hair had been singed and the smell of fire had passed upon his garments — he yet never showed himself lost to virtue. In the midst of deplorable weakness he retained his conviction that freedom, and truth, and purity, were best.

Nero's jealousy showed itself in the most public and insulting manner, when one day he got up and went out of the room for no reason whatever, in the middle of one of Lucan's readings. It culminated in a prohibition to Lucan to read or

publish anything further. The young poet, feeling within him the true fire of genius, nursed his rage in secret, and changed the tone of the 'Pharsalia' from inflated Cæsarism to savage denunciation. He mocks at the sham liberty which it accorded; brands with satire its shameful flatteries; and treating its apotheoses as a sacrilegious comedy, declares that the day would come 'when a freer and truer Rome would make a god, not of Cæsar, but of Cato.'[1] Ten years earlier he had been writing of Nero as a supreme divinity; now in his writing-desk lay the fierce complaint that, as a consequence of the civil wars, men had come to worship *shadows* in the temples of the gods.[2] He consoled his seclusion by living in virtuous union with the young wife whom he loved, and as he poured forth the epic of a soul lacerated by indignation, conscious of his future immortality, he wrote in secret —

'Pharsalia nostra
Vivet, et a nullo tenebris damnabitur ævo.'

When Piso's conspiracy began, Lucan became its passionate supporter. Men might ask what was the use of substituting one actor like Piso for another like Nero, but if a republic was impossible, Lucan felt that no change of a Cæsar could be for the worse, and in his burning hatred promised that he would slay the Emperor with his own hand.

Alas! when detection came; when he saw knights and senators and soldiers sinking all around him into treacherous weakness; when the grim executioner stood at his elbow pointing to the rack, Lucan had none of the inward strength or ennobling convictions which might have enabled him to retain his manhood. Sinking to an incredible depth of baseness, he betrayed the name of his own mother as an accomplice in the plot. His momentary infamy did not save his life, though it must have cost him a pang worse than that of death. Bidden to die, he opened his veins in four places, and went into a hot bath. His last thoughts at the end of a life so brief, so full of glory, so full of shame, are left unrecorded. Only as he watched the blood flow, he was reminded of the fantastic lines of the 'Pharsalia' in which he had described the similar death of a soldier on the field of battle. He recited them with a feeble voice, and spoke no more. That he should, at such a moment,

[1] *Pharsal.* ix. 601. [2] *Pharsal.* vii. 455–459.

have recalled verses so fantastic is characteristic of a soul not naturally ignoble, but distorted and, so to speak, encrimsoned by the horrors of life's tragedies and life's amusements in the midst of which he lived.

The death of his father, Mela, was also stained with dishonour. Avarice seems to have run in the family, and not even the death of his glorious son could check Mela's besetting vice. A nobler man would have hid his head in shame as well as sorrow, but Mela showed a discreditable eagerness in recovering the debts due to Lucan, whose great wealth was now added to his own. Among other debtors, he pressed hard on Fabius Romanus, who had been Lucan's intimate friend. What a picture do we see of the noble and literary society of Rome when we are told, as if it were a quite ordinary occurrence, that, in base revenge, this intimate friend of a poet who had betrayed his mother resorted to forgery in order to ruin his friend's father! He forged a letter of Lucan to prove an imaginary complicity in the plot between him and his father. Mela knew that his wealth would be his death warrant. Nero no sooner read the forged letter than he summoned Mela to his presence, with a keen eye on his possessions. Mela saw that the game of life was over, and opened his veins, after having written a will which was doubly base. To save his estate from confiscation, he left a large donation to Tigellinus, and his worthless son-in-law, Cossutianus Capito. He added spite to his greed and baseness. 'I am condemned to die,' he said, 'though I have done nothing to deserve punishment; but Crispinus and Anicius Cerealis live, though they are enemies of the Emperor.' Anicius Cerealis was the consul-designate who, after the conspiracy, had proposed in the senate that a temple should with all speed be reared at the public expense 'to the Divine Nero.' His abjectness did not save him. On hearing of the sentence in Mela's will he, too, committed suicide.

The senators seemed to take a pleasure in pusillanimous adulation. They decreed supplications to the gods, and a special honour to the Sun as the detector of the conspiracy, and a restoration of the Temple of Fortune from which Scævinus had taken his dagger. Amid these decrees, 'the sweet Gallio' pleaded humbly that his life might be spared, although his only crime was his relationship to Seneca and

Lucan. Whereupon a senator got up and denounced him as an enemy and a parricide. The rest had the decency to interfere on behalf of their popular and distinguished colleague. They begged the accuser to let sleeping dogs lie. But Gallio felt that his career of glory and popularity was over, and he too committed suicide.

The city was full of deaths, and the streets witnessed the daily spectacle of the stately funerals of these political victims, of whom so many were judicially murdered for their wealth, or to gratify the hatred of the Emperor. Yet such was the prevalent baseness, that men whose sons, or brothers, or friends, or kinsmen had been thus slain, returned thanks to the gods, adorned their doors with laurel as at the news of a public victory, and rushed to fling themselves at the knees of Nero, and cover his hand with their kisses! Many of the people believed that the reign of terror had been enacted simply to replenish the Emperor's treasury, and pitied the murdered aristocrats as though they had been as innocent as the murdered Christians.

No delation pleased Nero more than when Natalis coupled the name of Seneca with the name of Piso. How far Seneca was really an accomplice is doubtful. He had been cautious, but he can hardly have been ignorant that Subrius Flavus had formed a design to set Piso aside and elevate Seneca himself to the Empire. It was certainly suspicious that on the eve of the conspiracy Seneca had returned from his Campanian retreat, and stopped at one of his villas only four miles from the city. There was no evidence against him except this: — Natalis had been sent from Piso to complain that Seneca would never see him, and to ask 'why their friendship should thus be allowed to drop.' Seneca had replied 'that frequent intercourse was inexpedient for them both, but that his happiness depended on Piso's safety.' But it was whispered among Seneca's most intimate friends that he had, in fact, assented to the assassination of Nero 'in order to free Rome from Nero, and Nero from himself.' The glittering antithesis betrayed its own authorship.

Nero sent a Prætorian tribune, named Silvanus — not knowing that he too was one of the conspirators — to require an explanation from Seneca. He found the philosopher at supper with his beloved wife, Pompeia Paulina, and two friends.

Seneca gave a calm explanation. He had merely told Piso that he was in weak health, and desired perfect quiet. 'Why,' he said, in reply to the Emperor's inquiry, 'should I have preferred the fortunes of a private person to my own safety? I am no flatterer, that I should have made such a speech. No one knows this better than Nero, who has experienced my boldness more often than my servility.'

When Silvanus brought back the answer, he found Nero sitting with Poppæa and Tigellinus — a bad omen for Seneca's safety.

'Is he preparing to put himself to death?' asked the Emperor.

'No,' said the tribune. 'He showed no sign of panic. His look and his words were entirely cheerful.'

'Go, bid him die,' was Nero's brief answer.

Silvanus was, however, unwilling to deliver such a mandate in person to a brother conspirator. He sent it in by a centurion.

On receiving it, Seneca quietly rose from table and said to a slave, 'Bring me my will. I should like to leave a few legacies to those who love me.'

'I am sorry,' said the centurion, 'that the Emperor's commands admit of no such delay.'

'Be it so,' said Seneca, turning to his friends. 'Since, then, I have nothing else to leave you, I will leave you my fairest possession, the memory of my life. Be mindful of it, and you will win the fame of honest purpose and loyal friendship. Nay, my friends, do not weep. Where is your firmness? Where is your philosophy? I forbid these tears. Have I not been long preparing myself for this crisis? Was any one of us unaware of Nero's cruelty? After murdering his mother and his brother, what remained for him but to kill his tutor?'

Then he embraced Paulina, and, softening for a moment, entreated her not to waste her life in endless grief, but to mitigate the pang of widowhood by ever recalling that the life of her husband had been spent in virtue.

'I will die with you,' said Paulina. 'Let the physician open my veins as well as yours.'

'I will not check you,' said Seneca, 'if such is your glorious desire. Were I to forbid it, I should but leave you to the

endurance of future wrongs. If you prefer the dignity of death to the endurance of bereavement, let us both die with courage, though the greater distinction will be yours.'

In truth it would have been strange, and far from creditable, if Seneca had shown any pusillanimity when the hour of his condemnation came. Many of the philosophers had contracted life into a contemplation of death. The constant presentment of death to the mind in days so perilous was natural, and the possibility of a violent death must have been in Seneca's thoughts as often as though, like Trimalchio, he had possessed a little skeleton of articulated ivory, and had it passed round among his guests at every banquet with the melancholy refrain, 'What a little nothingness is man!' Even Lucan, in his short life, had come to the conclusion that 'Man's best lot is to know how to die, and the next best to be compelled to die'—

'Scire mori sors prima viris, sed proxima cogi.'[1]

The veins of Seneca and Paulina were opened with the same cut, but, as Seneca was old and attenuated by asceticism, his blood flowed slowly, and the veins of his legs were also cut. The ancients were under a strange delusion in supposing that bleeding was a mild kind of death. Seneca was so convulsed with agony that, fearing to break down Paulina's courage, he persuaded her to depart to another room. When she was gone, he began to dictate his last words. They were afterwards published and had been read by Tacitus, but they were so well known that he would not record them. They probably added little or nothing to what he has said about death so many times in his letters to Lucilius. He still lingered in agony, and bade his physician, Statius Annæus, to give him hemlock. When the poison failed to act, he stepped into a hot bath to expedite the flow of blood, and as he did so he sprinkled the slaves nearest to him, saying that it was his libation to Jupiter the Liberator. He was then carried into a bath-room and stifled with the vapour. His body was burnt, by the direction of his will, without any solemnity of funeral. Nero meanwhile had forbidden the suicide of Paulina. Her wounds were bound up, and she recovered; but during the

[1] *Pharsal.* ix. 211.

few years of her survival the excessive pallor of her face was a memorial of those tragic hours.

That Seneca's life was a failure is admitted even by those who justly regard him as a seeker after God. He knocked at the gates of virtue, but he scarcely entered. He lacked consistency; he lacked whole-heartedness. Charity makes us reject the dark charges made against him by the malice of Dion Cassius, but the history of his life shows that he laid himself fatally open to the accusation of hypocrisy. A Christian he certainly was not, though it is far from impossible that, through Pomponia or some other Christian, he may have seen some of the writings of St. Paul, and that this may account for the singular resemblance of tone and expression between some passages. Yet the resemblance is more superficial than real, and between the character of the Christian Apostle and that of the pagan philosopher there is an impassable chasm. In the whole course of his life and in every action and writing of it, St. Paul gave splendid evidence that his convictions swayed the whole current of his being; but Seneca's high-wrought declamations constitute the self-condemnation of every decisive incident in his personal history. A life dominated by avarice and ambition was unworthy of a professed philosopher; it fell far below the attainments of the humblest of those true Christians whom Nero burnt and Seneca despised. Seneca did little or nothing to make his age more virtuous; the Christians were the salt of the earth. The Pagans fled from despair to suicide; the Christians, in patient submission and joyful hope, meekly accepted the martyr's crown.

CHAPTER LIX

THE AGONY OF AN EMPRESS

'Satiety
And sloth, poor counterfeits of thee,
Mock the tired worlding. Idle Hope
And dire Remembrance interlope,
And vex the feverish slumbers of the mind:
The bubble floats before; the spectre stalks behind.'
COLERIDGE, *Ode to Tranquillity.*

In one of the most enchanting rooms of the Golden Palace, surrounded by every object of beauty and splendour which the wealth of kingdoms could supply, sat Poppæa, miserable in heart with a misery which nothing could alleviate — no luxury of the present, no memory of the past, no hope of the future. Like Agrippina, like Seneca, like Nero, she had been 'cursed with every granted prayer.' Nothing which this world could give was left for her to attain. Of the honours which overpower, of the riches which clog, of the pleasures which inflame the soul, she had unbounded experience. They had left her heart weary and her life in ashes, and she had never dreamed of the secret which had enabled so many thousands of humble Christians, whom she would have regarded as the dust beneath her feet, to find exaltation in abasement, wealth in penury, and joy in tribulation.

She was Empress; she was Augusta; she was mother of an infant who had been deified; her smile meant prosperity, her frown was death. Of what avail was it all? Could this awful power, could those inestimable gems, could the gorgeousness of her Golden House fill up the void in a heart numbed by satiety and chilled by despair? What had she to aim at? Her enemies had been swept out of her path. What had she left to hope for? There was no object of earthly wishes which she had not attained. Ah! but what work worth doing could she find to do in order to fill up the

vacuity of aimless self-indulgence? Who was there to love her, or whom she could love?

She thought of her early home, of her lovely mother, of her consular and triumphant grandfather, of the adoration which had surrounded her in the days of her own dawning beauty. She thought of Rufius Crispinus, the bridegroom of her youth, who had loved her tenderly, and whom she had loved, and of the little son whom she had borne him. He had grown up into a beautiful and gallant child, and the mother had always listened with pride to the anecdotes about him which were secretly brought to her. One of the heaviest of the many afflicting thoughts which were weighing upon her to-day was the manner in which Nero had treated her former husband and her son. Rufius Crispinus had once been Prætorian Præfect, and had been rewarded with consular insignia, but Nero hated his very name because he had been Poppæa's husband; and he had taken advantage of Piso's conspiracy first to banish him to Sardinia and recently to order him to put an end to his life. How fatal had her love been to him! It had blighted his career; it had stained his home; it had cut short his life. But what had her poor boy done that he too should perish? She had heard only a few days since that simply because in his games the high-spirited lad had played at being general or emperor, Nero had given orders to his slaves to drown him by suddenly pushing him into the sea while he sat fishing on a rock. She knew that this crime had been committed, and his bright young life sacrificed simply because he shared her blood; and what maddened her most of all was that she dared make no complaint, dared not even to reveal that she was aware of the murder, because to allude to her first husband or her son was always to rouse Nero into a paroxysm of fury. In the brightest and most luxurious room of the Golden House she sat solitary, and sobbing as if her heart would break.

Then she thought of Otho. Dandy as he was, and debauchee, to her at least he had been passionately faithful. She had abandoned Crispinus to live with Otho partly from a certain fascination which hung about his wickedness, but even more from motives of ambition, and because he was Nero's most cherished favourite. She heard good accounts of his administration in Lusitania. Her intrigues to entangle

the love of Nero had succeeded; but would she not have been incomparably more happy if she had remained in the home of Otho, and still more if she had lived as the virtuous wife of her first husband?

For with Nero she had long been disgusted, while she was obliged to feed his gluttonous vanity with perpetual eulogies of his beauty. And when in the close intercourse of daily life she saw to the depths of the man's nature, it was impossible for her to find any words sufficiently bitter for the expression of her contempt. And this wretched meticulous creature, with no manliness in him; this tenth-rate singer and dilettante twangler on harps; this lump of egregious vanity; this catspaw of Tigellinus, whose effeminacy was steeped in the blood of the innocent which he had shed like water — this womanish man, with none of the worth of Crispinus, and none of the charm of Otho, was to be her husband and companion for life! The day for other lovers, the day when she could have the excitement of secret intrigues, was past, for anything of the kind would mean instant death. And yet she felt more and more that it was impossible to retain secure hold on such love as Nero's. It was an ignoble love, tigerish and animal, which would evanesce long before her youth and beauty had faded away. If Nero had been a man — if there had been in his passion for her a single ennobling element — she might have retained him in her bondage for long years, as she could certainly have retained Otho. But already Nero preferred to her society the flattery of parasites and minions, and at this very time, though she was very sick and languid with the approach of motherhood, to which she looked forward with neither hope nor happiness, he had left her to her weary solitude, and for days had scarcely so much as seen or talked with her. Was some rival casting her spells over his volatile and evil nature, and taking vengeance on her for the wrongs of Octavia? The thought made her heart burn with a fury of impotent indignation.

She was determined that she would sit up this night and await his return in his own bedchamber; and, as opportunity occurred, would either assail him by reproaches, or win him back by caresses. How could she kill the interminable hours? She had no friend, no child, no confidante — none near her but slaves who hated her and yet

trembled at her presence. She had no resources in herself, nothing to occupy her but her own evil thoughts and deplorable regrets.

The Empress grew more and more weary, more and more tormented with intolerable thoughts through the leaden hours. At length, long after midnight, she heard the footsteps of the watch and of many slaves as they conducted Nero to his chamber.

'What! you here?' he said with contemptuous indifference as he dismissed his attendants.

She looked at him. He had evidently been drinking, and was fresh from one of the scenes of debauchery which always formed the conclusion of his charioteering displays. For he still wore the dress of a jockey of the green faction, and its succinctness revealed his thin legs and protuberant person. To her he looked a spectacle of ignominy. Where was the passionate courtesy with which her Otho would have greeted her? Where the fond caress which Crispinus would have printed on her cheek? To think that this thing was the Emperor of Rome!

She half-rose from her couch, her pale face aflame with indignation.

'Jockey!' she hissed out. 'Companion of base minions, comrade of coarse gladiators, where have you been? Why do you thus steep manhood in ignominy and drag the purple of Empire through the mud?'

It was the pent-up passion of her woman's heart which thus burst forth, and it came on Nero like an unexpected blow. He looked at her for a moment with eyes opened to their fullest, and then, staggering forwards, dealt her a brutal kick.

Poppæa, with a groan of anguish, sank swooning to the ground. She lay on the floor as dead, her features white as marble, her hair streaming from its bands and covering the floor with its gleaming waves. The sight sobered Nero. Had he killed her? Furious as he was, he had not intended that. He loudly summoned his slaves and Poppæa's attendants, and they bore her, still unconscious, to her own apartments. Nero did not tell any one what had happened, but when the physicians saw the bruise which his foot had made they knew everything, and when she had awoke from

her swoon Poppæa disdainfully told them the simple truth. From the first they did not conceal from her or from Nero that, in her delicate situation, her life would be in extreme peril.

She lingered on in anguish for many days, her heart broken, her life sacrificed. Nero would fain have testified his maudlin and unavailing remorse. He passionately desired a child to continue his line, and now he had shattered his own hopes. If he had ever loved any woman with anything resembling real love, it was Poppæa. He had only kicked her in the blind rage of ruthless egotism. Nothing had been further from his intention than to murder her or even to cause her excruciating pangs.

He asked to be admitted to her presence, but she refused to see him. She sent to tell him that unless he wished to kill her, he would not visit her. The physicians assured him that the mere suggestion of his entering the room had thrown her into dangerous convulsions. As for the expressions of regret which he had written to her, she was too weak and ill to write any reply, and she deigned to send no message.

There was one person, and one only, whom she wished to see. It was Pomponia Græcina. For her Poppæa had always felt an involuntary respect, and had been deeply impressed by her words and bearing when she came to plead for the Christians. If there were any one who could bring healing to her wounded soul, or suggest one moment's peace to her tortured heart, it was the stainless wife of Aulus Plautius.

Pomponia had been sick nigh unto death. The prison fever which she had caught in ministering to the Christians had been a virulent typhoid, from which she would not have recovered but for her untroubled conscience, her pure and simple life. For herself she did not wish to live. Not only had her young Aulus been disgraced and murdered, but what she had witnessed of the treatment of the Christians, and what she had heard of their exterminating martyrdoms, had ploughed up the depths of her soul with horror. She almost longed that it could have been permitted her to share the fate of all those dear men and women whom she had known, and who had now passed with white robes and palms in their hands into the presence of their Saviour. But her husband was falling into deep melancholy, and for his sake she made every effort to re-

cover. And because in all her troubles the peace of God was with her, her constitution triumphed over the ravages of the disease, and when she received a message that Poppæa was lying on her death-bed and longed to see her, she was daily regaining her strength in her villa at Tibur.

She did not hesitate ; — for what purpose was there in life if it were not to do deeds of helpfulness and love ? She was carried in her litter from Tibur to the Golden House, and conducted to the chamber of the Empress. She was spared the trial of meeting Nero, who that day was taking part in a contest of singing and harp-playing on the public stage at the quinquennial Neronia. To prevent that disgrace, the Senate had spontaneously offered him the crowns of eloquence and song. But the *semblance* of victory did not suit his vanity. He played at being a fair competitor. The theatre was crowded to suffocation, not only with Romans but with provincials, and several knights and burghers had been trodden to death in the opening rush to secure seats. And there stood Nero on the stage, harp in hand, bowing and scraping to the assembly, and trembling with sham nervousness before the adjudicators ! It was an infinitely dreary entertainment, for the soldiers stood in every gangway with batons, beating those who did not applaud or who applauded in wrong places, and as no one was allowed to leave the theatre on pain of death, not a few were taken seriously ill, while some braved the risk of dropping down from the outside, and some pretended to faint or die that they might be carried out of the theatre. It was on this occasion that poor Vespasian fell into new disgrace. Harp-playing and singing, whether good or execrable, was not at all in his line, and, do what he would, he found it impossible to prevent himself from falling asleep, as he had already done in the villa at Subiaco. He was caught in the act by Phœbus, the freedman of Nero, who roughly shook him by the shoulder, and abused him without stint. He was very near being condemned to death, but so many persons of distinction interceded for him, that this time Nero spared him. He was, however, forbidden ever again to appear at Court, and received a strong hint that the more entirely he kept out of the way the safer it would be for him. 'What am I to do ?' he asked Phœbus, 'and whither am I to go ?' '*Abi Morboniam !* Go to the dogs !' answered the insolent freed-

man. A few years later, when Vespasian wore the purple, the freedman implored his pardon for the insult. '*Abi Morboniam!* Go to the dogs!' was the only answer of the good-humoured Emperor.

While Nero was fooling away his Empire in such scenes Pomponia entered the chamber of death. There lay Poppæa in the miserable wreck of her youth and loveliness. Wicked she had been, and crowned with every gift but that of virtue, yet Pomponia could not but pity one so young and so lost, childless, hopeless, unloved, bereaved—thrice wedded, though still in early life, and now the victim of her husband's brutality.

Poppæa turned her languid glance towards the opening door, but when she saw who her visitor was, the poor face, drawn and convulsed with pain, brightened for an instant. The 'amber' tresses which Nero had sung of had been cut off to relieve her feverish brows, and Pomponia's experienced eye detected on her countenance the seal of death.

'You think that there is no hope?' whispered Poppæa as she saw the look of compassion deepen on Pomponia's face. 'Ah, tell me the truth as it is, and do not flatter me with false hopes as these slaves do.'

'I fear that you will die, Augusta,' answered Pomponia, solemnly yet tenderly.

'Call me not by that vain title. Would that I had never borne it! Would that I had died in childhood, or in my first home! Had I done so, loving faces might have been looking on me now.'

'Linger not in the thoughts of the past, Poppæa; it is irrevocable.'

'Yes,' she said, 'it is irrevocable; and I cannot bear the faces which look upon me so reproachfully—the face of my murdered husband, Crispinus; of my drowned son; worst of all the sad face of Octavia.' A shudder ran through all her frame. 'At every moment,' she said, 'directly I close my eyes, her head is before me, as I saw it in all its ghastliness.'

'Grieve not for Octavia,' said Pomponia. 'I have heard all about her death. She died forgiving all her enemies, and in perfect peace.'

'Peace? Where is it to be had?' asked Poppæa. 'It is not a pearl, I think, of any earthly ocean.'

'No,' said Pomponia, 'but of a heavenly.'

'Heavenly? What is heaven?' asked Poppæa, wearily. 'All that we know is life; and life has given me all that pleasure can give, and rank and riches, and the adoration of self; and it has left me so miserable that life itself has grown hateful to me, while yet I fear death.'

Pomponia listened in profound sadness. 'Poppæa,' she said, 'I need not fear now to tell you that I am a Christian; and we Christians have been taught that "he who saveth his life shall lose it, and he who loseth it for Christ's sake, shall find it." It is too late for you to redeem the life which you have flung away, or to find the pleasure which you have slain in seeking for it. But while there is life, there is hope. The God in whom we Christians believe is a God of mercy, and we believe also that Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins, and that by Him they may be washed away.'

'All the waters of Adria would not wash mine away. Oh, Pomponia, do you know that Seneca, and Octavia, and many others owed their deaths to me?'

'You have sinned deeply; but you have, I know, been taught about the sacred books of the Jews, and have you not read there of a guilty king, an adulterer and murderer, who yet prayed "Oh, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great"? And has no Jewish teacher read you the promise of God by His prophet, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool"?'

'I have heard those words,' said Poppæa. 'They were quoted to me once by Helen, Queen of Adiabene, who is now living as a proselyte at Jerusalem; and I have been taught that there is but one God.'

'Oh, pray to Him, then,' said Pomponia, 'for He is abundant in pardon.'

'I know not how to pray,' said the dying Empress; 'pray for me.'

If Poppæa knew not, Pomponia knew well; for to her, as a Christian, prayer had become the habit, the attitude of her life. Poppæa had never before heard such words as those. She knew that when she died she would be made a goddess by the Senate, as her infant child had been; yet here by her bedside Pomponia was speaking of her as though she were any other

woman, speaking of her deep sinfulness, and not making any difference between her case and that of the commonest slave-girl who might have lived an evil life. And all that she could do was to resign her soul, and suffer it to be borne along unresisting on that stream of prayer.

And yet she felt, even in her misery, some dim sense of consolation, some faint gleam of hope such as she had never felt before. She knew that death was near, and urged Pomponia not to leave her. Pomponia sat by the bedside, holding the weak hand, and doing every act of tenderness, and speaking words of consolation, until the sinful troubled life had ebbed away.

Such a mind as Nero's had become was incapable of sorrow. He announced, indeed, that he was overwhelmed with grief, and he indulged in a certain amount of hysterical and theatric lamentation, which interfered in no way with his follies or his appetities. A funeral was decreed to Poppæa at the public expense, and Nero at the Rostra pronounced a eulogy — not on her virtues, for there were none on which he could speak, but on her beauty and high fortune, and because she had been the mother of a divine infant. By her own wish — learnt doubtless from the Jews — she was buried, and not burnt as was the Roman custom. Nero had so many spices burnt at her funeral that the learned doubted whether Arabia could furnish more in a single summer. But not one genuine tear was shed upon her grave.

CHAPTER LX

THE DOOM OF VIRTUE

'Each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds.'
SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*, iv. 3.

NERO went on, unchecked, from folly to folly, from crime to crime. One of his earliest objects was to secure another Empress. He paid his addresses to Antonia, the only surviving child of Claudius, the half-sister of Octavia and Britannicus. She spurned his odious offer of marriage, and paid the forfeit with her life. In adopting Nero the unhappy Claudius had caused the murder of all his race. The Emperor then married Statilia Messalina, wife of the consul Vestinus, whom he had already killed.

In reading the affairs of Rome at this period we seem to be suffering from nightmare. The whole of the sixteenth book of the 'Annals' of Tacitus is one tragedy of continuous murders. Whenever Nero wanted to terrify a noble Roman by the presage of death, he inflicted on him a public insult. The world understood what was meant when Caius Cassius, the great lawyer, whose speech about the slaves of Pedanius we have already recorded, was forbidden to attend the funeral of Poppæa. The real cause of Nero's hatred was that he was a man of wealth, of ancient family, of moral dignity; but the charges brought against him were that he had a likeness of Cassius, the murderer of Cæsar, among the waxen masks of his ancestors, and that he had taken an interest in Lucius Silanus, a noble youth, the great-great-great-grandson of Augustus. The youth's father, Marcus Silanus (the 'golden sheep' of Caligula), had already been poisoned by Agrippina, and his uncle been driven to suicide. It seemed a good opportunity to destroy the nephew also. He was attacked with

false charges of magic, and was banished to Bari. Cassius, being an old man, was relegated to Sardinia, and Nero was content to wait for his death; but Silanus was young, and a centurion was sent to bid him open his veins. The youth refused to kill himself with the sheeplike docility of so many of his contemporaries. When the centurion ordered his soldiers to attack and slay him, he fought for his life with his unarmed hands, and was hewn down as though in battle.

At this point the historian Tacitus grew so sick and tired of his task in recording events so dismal, that he pauses to apologise to his reader, and to say a word for all these great nobles who, at the command of a Nero, committed suicide one after another so tamely. He begs the reader not to suspect his motives in detailing their slavish patience and pusillanimous acquiescence.[1] All that he can say is that it was destiny — it was the wrath of heaven against the crimes of Rome.

We pass over many a tragic scene in silence, but we cannot escape from this long death-agony of a Paganism which poisoned the world with its dying breath before its corpse was swept aside by Christianity. The wild beast who had dipped his foot in the blood of the saints, and made the tongue of his dogs red through the same, was now bathing in the noblest blood of Rome. The world was in a condition truly horrible, and there were all kinds of portents and physical disasters, as though Nature sympathised with the birth-throes of the coming age. There were earthquakes in divers places, shaking down city after city in Asia Minor, and volcanic phenomena, and irruptions of the sea, and rains of meteors as though the stars fell from heaven, and comets, and eclipses, and monstrous births — which all afflicted the guilty conscience of Paganism as signs of the anger of the gods at the degree of wickedness at which it had arrived. The year 65 marked by the many atrocities which we have narrated, was foul with storm and pestilence, which caused untold misery. A whirlwind swept over Campania, wrecking villas and orchards and harvests in its ruthless course, and leaving famine and destitution in its rear. A pestilence broke out with fearful malignity. It spared neither young nor old, neither rich nor poor, neither slave nor master. The houses were filled

[1] Tac. *Ann.* xvi. 16.

with corpses, the roads with funerals. Streets in the infected quarters became little more than dwellings of the dead. The dead among the poor were flung into common pits, whither their bearers had often to be flung after them; and while the wives and children of the rich sat wailing round the funeral pyres, they were often swept off by the same disease, and burnt in the same flames. Senators and knights fell victims to the plague no less than paupers; but their fate was less pitied, for it seemed less sad to pay the common debt of mortality than to perish by imperial cruelty. In that pestilence thirty thousand perished in Rome alone.

Nero was safe enough, for he could escape the infection in his distant delicious villas at Antium, or Baiæ, or Naples, or Subiaco, and could live in the midst of his dissolute enormities undisturbed. He was turning the world giddy with his senseless vanities, his Golden House, his prurient art, his insane ostentations, his statues and portraits a hundred and twenty feet high. Yet he had his own dread warnings that, though the sword of Heaven was not in haste to strike, it was not thrust back into the scabbard. There were hours when the voice of flattery was hushed perforce, when the incense of adulation grew sickening, when pleasure became loathsome, and when in the dark and silent hours the torturing mind shook its scourge over him. Not even at Subiaco was he safe from conspirators; he never knew what slave, what soldier, what minion might stab his heart or poison his wine. Of the society which had thronged that villa in his earlier days of empire, there was scarcely one whom he had not killed. Britannicus and Octavia, Seneca and Burrus, Lucan and Vestinus, even Petronius, had been in turns his victims; and poor, handsome Paris did not long escape. Pale faces, dyed with blood, looked in upon him from dim recesses, or started to meet him from the bushy garden-dells. Tigellinus was with him, and his new colleague in the Prætorian Præfectship, the big, brutal Nymphidius, a man of base origin, who boasted that he was a natural son of Caligula, but was probably the son of a gladiator. But these men had nothing wherewith to amuse him — no wit, no learning — nothing but the coarse satieties of adulation, debauchery, and blood. No poet, no artist, no great writer now graced the board which was polluted by parasites, and poisoners, and effeminate slaves. And

to add to his secret misery and terror, one day, as he was feasting at Subiaco in such society, a storm came on, and rolled among the mountains with reverberating echoes; and, as though he were the sole mark for the thunderbolts of heaven, the lightning dashed out of his hand the golden goblet which he was lifting to his lips, and split the citron table at which he sat. He fell back screaming upon his couch, and for some time grovelled there — a heap of abject terror. But the cup of his iniquity had yet to overflow the brim, as this and every other warning was sent in vain.

Indeed, he sometimes imagined that he was elevated above the reach of all human destiny, and that the gods were weary of opposing his prosperity. When some of his precious effects had been lost in a shipwreck, he told his friends that the fishes would bring them back to him. For now an event happened which powerfully magnetised the imagination of the Romans, and elevated Nero to a splendour which Augustus might have envied. Tiridates, the Parthian, the descendant of the Arsacids, was journeying all the way to Rome, to receive from Nero's hand as a vassal the crown of Armenia. Being a Magian, he would not pollute the sacredness of the sea, and therefore came all the way by land, and on horseback, only crossing the Hellespont. He was accompanied by his harem and family, and by three thousand horsemen. The journey occupied nine months, and when he reached Italy he did not stop at Rome, but went to Naples to visit Nero. The scene of the Parthian's investment with the diadem of Armenia was the most magnificent which Rome had ever beheld. Armed cohorts were ranged through all the temples round the Forum. Nero sat on the Rostra, among the standards and ensigns of the army, robed in triumphal insignia. Tiridates, mounting the steps, knelt before him. Nero raised him by the right hand, and embraced him. The king then begged that he might receive a diadem from the Emperor, and his petition was repeated to the people by a Prætorian interpreter. Nero placed the diadem — a band of purple silk woven with pearls — upon the head of Tiridates, and he was conducted to the Theatre of Pompey. It had been redecorated for the occasion, and was so enriched with gilding that the day was known as 'the gilded day.' The purple awning over the theatre was richly broidered with a picture of Nero

in the costume of Apollo, driving his chariot among the stars. On this occasion Nero sang and drove his chariot in public, and won the hearty contempt of the wily Parthian, who, struck with his weakness in comparison with the manly valour of his general, Corbulo, remarked to him that 'in Corbulo he had a good slave.'

The sums which Nero lavished on the Parthian by way of largesse before his departure were almost incredible. It was believed that one motive for urging the visit had been the Emperor's desire to be initiated into the secrets of necromancy by the Persian Magi, in order to appease the angry manes of his mother. Attempts were made, and it was whispered that human blood had not been lacking as one of the ingredients of the incantation. But the initiation was futile, and the Magians secretly averred that the failure was due to the unworthiness of the novice. The Armenian king vanished like a gorgeous cloud, leaving Nero more than ever in need of funds and more than ever reckless in the wicked means by which they might be amassed, though he dedicated a laurel wreath in the Capitol, and closed, as Augustus had done, the Temple of Janus.

But the time when the whole attention of the populace was absorbed in the pomp of this reception was purposely selected for the commission of further crimes. Nero had tried to obliterate on false charges the innocent Christians; he had swept away all the noblest of the aristocracy; he had banished or killed the philosophers; he now ventured to strike a blow at Pætus Thrasea and Barea Soranus, the two most honoured and virtuous of the Roman senators; and in doing so, as Tacitus says, to exterminate virtue itself.

The question arose whether Thrasea should defend himself, or treat the accusation with disdain, and die. The braver spirits longed to hear him speaking in the senate and rising above the sluggish acquiescence with which so many had obeyed the tyrant, and bled themselves to death in their private baths. His feebler friends advised him not to undergo the insults, the contumelious speeches, possibly even the personal violence, which might await him in that degraded assembly of the timid and the servile, in which even the good would be sure to be cowed into base concessions. His defence would assuredly be in vain, and it might involve

the ruin of his wife, his family, and all whom he loved. The young tribune Rusticus Arulenus went so far as to promise that he would exercise his ancient tribunician privilege, and veto a decree of condemnation. But Thrasea decided to follow the ordinary course. He forbade the generous tribune to plunge himself into futile peril. His life and his career were over; those of Arulenus were only beginning. He decided to await the decision, and not to appear in his own defence. When his friends remonstrated, he quoted to them with a smile a line from the 'Œdipus' of Seneca —

> 'Tacere liceat; nulla libertas minor
> A rege petitur.'

'Let Nero,' he said, 'at least accord me the privilege of holding my tongue.' We can only regret that he did not rise to an energy which might have startled the degenerate nobles from the pusillanimity which yielded everything in despair of striking a blow. Thrasea might, indeed, have been murdered in the Senate-house, but such a murder would have aroused a reaction and precipitated a beneficent revolution. Daring is contagious, and one dauntless spirit may flash nobleness into a host of slaves.

The Senate was summoned to meet next morning in the Temple of Venus Genetrix, and found the temple beset by two Prætorian cohorts, who, in insolent defiance of the law, did not hesitate to display to the assembling senators their menacing swords. The Emperor's complaints were read by a quæstor. Without naming any one, he inveighed against senators who set a slothful and pernicious example by neglecting their legislative duties. Then Capito sprang to his feet, and used this charge like a fatal weapon. But though he was animated by personal hatred of Thrasea, the speech of the orator Marcellus Eprius was still more passionate and envenomed. With frowning brow, with threatening gestures, with his eyes, his face, his words blazing with fury, he charged Thrasea with encouraging the spirit of sedition by impotent disdain for his clear duties. But if the senate was terrified by this *lucrosa et sanguinans eloquentia*,[1] it was terrified still more by the crowd of soldiers and the gleam of arms. Thrasea

[1] *Dial. de Orat.* 12.

was condemned to death; his son-in-law, Helvidius Priscus, was banished from Italy.

It was evening, and Thrasea was in his gardens among a throng of illustrious men and women. They were listening to his conversation with the Cynic Demetrius on the nature of the soul, when a messenger came to tell Thrasea of his condemnation. He urged all his friends to leave him immediately, and not to imperil themselves by association with one who had been condemned. In those days compassion was dangerous; the kindly bonds of human relationship had been snapped by fear.

He was only allowed an hour in which to die. His wife, Arria, wished to die with him. Her mother, the elder Arria, when her husband, Cæcina Pætus, had been condemned under Claudius, plunged a dagger into her own breast, and plucking it from the wound, put it into the hand of her husband with the words, 'My Pætus, it does not hurt.' The daughter would fain have emulated her mother. But Thrasea would not let her open her veins. He bade her to live for the sake of their child, Fannia. In the porch he met the quæstor, and seemed more cheerful at the thought that Helvidius had been spared than grieved that he himself had been condemned. 'Nero may slay me,' he said, 'but destroy me he cannot. He can kill me, but he cannot make me do wrong.'

He took Helvidius and Demetrius with him into his chamber. The indomitable spirit of the latter was well adapted to confirm his resolution. Demetrius had reduced life to its simplest elements, and Seneca, who greatly admired him, said that he delighted to leave courtiers arrayed in purple and to talk with this half-clad philosopher, to whom nothing was lacking because he desired nothing. On one occasion, when Nero threatened Demetrius with death, he calmly replied, 'You denounce death to me, and Nature denounces it to you.'

Thrasea sat down, and extended both arms to the physician. When his blood began to flow he sprinkled some of it on the ground, and exclaimed, as Seneca had done, 'I pour a libation to Jupiter the Liberator.' Then calling the quæstor nearer to him, he said, 'Look, young man. May Heaven avert the omen from you, but you are born to times in which it is well to fortify your mind by examples of constancy.'

They are his last recorded words. His funeral was humble. His pyre burned silently in the gardens of his deserted house, and when they had gathered his ashes his wife and daughter had yet to endure the anguish of parting with Helvidius. The hours of their heart-breaking sorrow were insulted by shouts of rapture with which the people greeted the Parthian Tiridates and the murderer of their beloved.

During the condemnation of Thrasea and Helvidius the Temple of Venus Genetrix had been the scene of a tragedy still more pathetic — of a tragedy perhaps the most pathetic ever witnessed in that assembly of woe. Barea Soranus, like Thrasea, was a Stoic. He had been the Proconsul of Asia, and was charged with the double crime of friendship for Rubellius Plautius and of having administered his province rather with a view to his own glory than for the public good. This was an allusion to his honourable conduct in having supported the people of Pergamus in their opposition to the greedy robbery of their statues by Acratus, the freedman of Nero. These were old charges, but to them was added the new and deadly one that his daughter, Servilia, had practised arts of sorcery and given money to the diviners of horoscopes.

The hapless Servilia was little more than a girl, yet she was practically a widow. Her husband, Annius Pollio, had been driven into exile, as an accomplice in the Pisonian conspiracy, though no evidence had been brought against him. The poor young widow — she was not yet twenty years old — was falling sick with the intensity of her anxiety for the father whom she tenderly loved. She had merely consulted the Chaldeans, in the anguish of her heart and the inexperience of her youth, to know whether Nero would be placable, and Soranus be able to refute the charges brought against him, or, at any rate, to escape with his life. The impostors, after accepting large sums and exhausting her resources, had basely betrayed her.

On opposite sides of the tribunal where Nero sat between the two consuls stood the hapless prisoners — the father grey with age, the young daughter not even venturing to lift up her eyes to his face, because in her rash affection she had increased his perils.

The accuser was a knight named Ostorius Sabinus. 'Did

you not,' he asked the trembling girl, 'sacrifice the revenues of your dower, did you not even sell the necklace off your neck, to get funds for your magic incantations?'

Servilia prostrated herself upon the ground, and for some time could find no voice to speak; then rising, and embracing the altar of Venus Genetrix, 'I invoked,' she exclaimed, 'no infernal deities; I uttered no prayers of imprecation. The sole object of my ill-omened supplications was that thou, O Cæsar, that ye, O senators, might preserve to me this the best of fathers. I gave the Chaldeans my gems, my robes, the adornment of my matronly dignity; I would have given them, had they demanded it, my blood, my life. Let *them* look to it; their very existence and the nature of their arts were hitherto unknown to me. I never mentioned the name of the Emperor, except among the deities. And of all that I did my father knew nothing. If what I have done be a crime, I have sinned alone.'

'Senators!' exclaimed her father, Soranus, 'let her be at once acquitted. She is free from all the charges urged against me. She did not accompany me to my province; she was too young to have known Rubellius Plautus; she was in no way implicated in the accusations against her husband. Her sole error has been her filial affection. Separate her case from mine. She is still in early youth. Let one victim suffice you. I am prepared to undergo whatever fate you inflict upon me, but spare my child!'

At those tender words he opened his arms, and his daughter sprang to his embrace, but the lictors lowered their cruel fasces, and interposed between them.

Then the witnesses were called, and a murmur of contempt and indignation broke out even among those abject senators when Publius Egnatius Celer stepped out first among them. The lip of Soranus curled in strong disdain, and he muttered the one word 'Traitor!' For Egnatius was a professed Stoic; he was a client of Soranus; he had been his teacher in philosophy; he was old, and Soranus young; he had received from his hands unnumbered kindnesses; he had himself encouraged Servilia to consult the astrologers. He wore the dress of a philosopher; he had trained his features to assume the aspect of Stoic dignity. But on this day he tore the mask off his own face, and revealed himself as what he was — a lecherous,

treacherous, avaricious, hypocritic villain, who, having concealed his leprous character under the guise of honour, did not hesitate for a moment to sell his friend for money in the hour of calamity, and thereby dishonoured his grey hairs, and earned for himself the execration of all time.[1] The wretch lived on in deserved and general infamy. In better days he was accused by Musonius Rufus and himself condemned. But to Soranus and Servilia were meted out such justice as could alone be expected from such judges. The only mercy extended to them was the permission to choose their mode of death.

Such was the state of things in the days of Nero. The aristocracy were like men who live in an unknown land, glancing on every side at the slightest sound. Seneca, who had lived through that reign of terror, most truly depicts it. His sole remedy is stubborn resignation. Even abstinence from action requires prudence, for you may be condemned for what you do *not* do. Above all must men shun the Court, 'that sad prison of slaves.' But, after every precaution, no one could be safe, and therefore, Stoic-fashion, men must accustom themselves to regard all calamities as matters of indifference. 'Above all, is not suicide always possible?' Seneca asks; 'and is not that the best antidote to tyranny? The path of escape is open everywhere. Do you see this precipice? It is the descent to Liberty! Do you see this sea, this well, this river? Liberty lies hidden in their depths! Do you see this little barren, distorted tree? Liberty hangs from its branches!'[2] The historian is reminded of the picture of Pascal. 'Imagine a number of men in chains, all condemned to death, some of whom have their throats cut daily in sight of the rest, while the survivors see in their fate their own condition, and gaze one on another with sorrow, and without hope.'

[1] 'Stoicus occidit Baream, delator amicum,
Discipulumque senex, ripa nutritus in illa
Ad quam Gorgonei delapsa est pinna caballi.'
Juv. *Sat.* iii. 116.

[2] Sen. *De Ira*, iii. 15.

CHAPTER LXI

BEFORE THE LION

Καὶ ἐῤῥύσθην ἐκ στόματος λέοντος.
S. Paul. ad Tim. β. iv. 17.

When Onesimus had succeeded in rescuing Nereus from the pitchy tunic on the dreadful-glorious night of the Church's martyrdom, the two made their way through the darkness to Aricia, which they reached at the earliest dawn. Old Dromo welcomed them, and Junia received her father with transports of love and gratitude. Onesimus hung modestly back during their meeting, but when the girl had ceased to weep on her father's neck, she turned to his deliverer, and thanked him from her heart as one to whose courage and devotion she owed his preservation from that death of agony.

During that day they arranged their plans. In the little farm and vineyard of Pudens there was ample room for free labour, and it was settled that Nereus and Junia should stay there for the present, Nereus working in the vineyard, and Junia helping in the care of the flocks and fowls, and in the management of the household. Among those groves, in that remote and humble homestead, they were safe in their obscurity, and there they could abide until some other opportunity offered, or happier times came round.

Onesimus thought it his duty to return to the Apostle, to whose service he had devoted his life. The generosity of Octavia had left him with sufficient funds for his simple needs, and he prepared to make his way to Crete, where he expected to find St. Paul. But before he started he asked Nereus to sanction his marriage with Junia. Both of them were baptised Christians, and Onesimus had now sufficiently proved the sincerity of his faith, and the depth of his repentance for former errors.

'I am grateful to thee, youth,' said the old man, 'and I know that thou art a brand plucked from the burning. But

the coming of the Lord draweth nigh, and the sky is red and lowering, and Antichrist is striving to destroy the Church of God. Is it a time to marry and give in marriage? Is it not rather a time for them who have wives to be as though they had none, and for the unmarried to abide as virgins because of the present necessity?'

'I know it, my father,' said Onesimus; 'but thou mayst die, and Junia be left an orphan in these evil days. Let us be married, and she will have an earthly arm to defend her and toil for her. We will marry, and will separate to-day. I will seek the Apostle, and if it be God's will He will make our way plain before our face.'

Nereus consented. At a little distance from Rome, in the loneliness of the Campagna, the fossors had already begun to construct the catacomb now known as that of St. Callistus, and there in a small subterranean chapel in one of those dim galleries, the Christians began to hold their evening or early morning assemblies. Thither after sunset Nereus, Onesimus, and Junia made their way. They found but a handful of Christians who had escaped the fury of the persecution, and though these were, in one sense, deeply discouraged by the shattering blow which had destroyed their Church, and almost heartbroken at the agonising loss of their loved brethren, in another sense they were full of hope and exalted courage, and uttered to one another their watchword *Maranatha*, with more intense conviction. And among them was Cletus, who had escaped as by miracle. His name had been denounced, but being young and active, he had succeeded in hiding himself and eluding research. He was now the humble bishop of the ruined community. He it was who joined the hands of Onesimus and Junia in the holy bond, and he it was who blessed the bread and wine of which the little band of brethren partook in humble communion. Marriage gladness, marriage festivities there were none. The Phrygian freedman and the Roman maiden pledged their faith to each other under the shadow of the Cross.

Before the dawn was red, Onesimus was making his way to Rhegium, whence he purposed to get to Messana, and so by ship to Lasæa on the stormy shores of Crete. On his arrival he found only Titus of Corinth, whom St. Paul had

left in charge of the young and struggling Churches. He sailed in search of the Apostle, and his ship stopped for a day at Patmos, where he found the Beloved Disciple in his exile. The ascendency of St. John's personality had overawed the inhabitants of that rocky islet, and he was suffered to spend his time in freedom. Onesimus sat with him under a grey olive tree, on the grassy summit of a rock, the highest point of the island, and discoursed with him for hours. The scene was lovely. The brilliant sapphire of the sea lay beneath them in unbroken calm, rippled here and there by the white wings of the beautiful seabirds. The crags glowed a deep rich red, except when they were covered with grass, on which the pink sea-thrift had already faded into white. On every side the sea-line was broken by the fantastic contour of isles and islets. Eastward on the Ionian shore, so rich in heroic and philosophic memories, they saw the historic summit of Mount Mycale, and northwards the island of Thera. A burning mountain, cast into the midst of the sea, and at that time in a crisis of violent eruption, it vomited, as though from the depths of the abyss, its volumes of turbid smoke which hung like a cloud at one spot of the far horizon.[1] It was here that St. John heard from Onesimus the scenes which had followed his providential deliverance from the boiling oil, the illumination of Nero's gardens with living torches, the orgies of the wild beast from the sea of nations as he wallowed in the blood of the saints. His whole soul was already brooding on the awful manifesto in which he answered the fury of the world, and spoke of the impending destruction of the two great cities of antiquity — Jerusalem, the metropolis of God's olden Temple; Rome, the metropolis of the dragon and the Antichrist. Here, too, he entrusted to Onesimus — in whose youth, prudence, and courage he was interested — some of the keys to that strange cryptogram of the Apocalypse, which, if it had been written otherwise than in symbols, might have involved the ruin of whole communities. Among other things he told him that, by the cabbalistic system of Gematria, which the Greeks called isopsephism, 'Nero Cæsar' *in Hebrew letters* gave that which he had called the number of the Beast, 666. It was necessary

[1] Sen. *Quæst. Nat.* ii. 26, vi. 21.

that such secrets should be kept with care, for in the hands of an informer they might lead to overwhelming disasters; yet Onesimus did not wholly throw into the Mæander the key to the secret; but in due time revealed enough to guide the guesses which Irenæus and others of the ancient Christian Fathers had heard through the martyr Polycarp.

From Patmos Onesimus sailed to Ephesus, but did not overtake the Apostle Paul till he had followed him to Nicopolis, in Epirus. After a restful winter there St. Paul went through Macedonia to Troas. There, in the hospitable house of Carpus, he was suddenly arrested at the instance of Alexander the coppersmith, who was animated by trade grudges, because that part of his work which was connected with small images of Diana of the Ephesians had suffered from Paul's preaching. Paul was seized by night, and so suddenly that he had no time to take with him his few precious books and documents and his large cloak. He was hurried to Ephesus, and tried before the proconsul; but, knowing that there he was little likely to obtain justice, he again appealed to Cæsar. During his imprisonment at Ephesus he had been cheered by Onesiphorus, and by the son of his heart Timotheus, who had shared with him for so many years in the life of a despised and hunted missionary. They parted with streaming tears which Paul long remembered. With Onesimus as his attendant, and Luke, Demas, Tychicus, Trophimus, and Erastus as his fellow-helpers, the glorious prisoner set forth on his last journey. Trophimus fell ill at Miletus; Erastus stayed at Corinth, of which city he had been chamberlain. They went over the Diolkos to Lechæum, along the Gulf of Corinth, and across the Adriatic to Brundisium. Thence they made their dreary way to Rome. This time there were no rejoicing crowds of Christians to meet them at Appii Forum or the Three Taverns, at sight of whom he could thank God and take courage. He found the Church of Rome in its ashes. No one could visit him without peril; and indeed no Christian of rank was left at Rome. Clemens and his family shared the disgrace into which Vespasian had fallen, and were living at the Sabine farm. Pomponia, after her visit to Poppæa, had suffered a severe relapse, and had been moved to a distant villa in the Apennines. Every leader of the

Christian Church except Cletus and Hermas had perished in the persecution. Pudens was in Britain with Caractacus and Claudia. In later days the devotion of Christians to their imprisoned brethren struck Pagans with curious amazement, but Paul himself discouraged visits which might so easily bring death to the visitors. He was left, therefore, in painful loneliness, except for the loving care of Luke and Onesimus. Of his companions, Demas had forsaken him, and the presence of others had been necessary in various Churches. He was imprisoned, as his brother Apostles had been, in the Tullianium, and it was difficult to find out where he was. The Ephesian Onesiphorus, who came to Rome for the purpose, cheered his heart by fearlessly seeking him, and, unashamed of his chain, refreshed him in this his seventh imprisonment with that sense of human sympathy which he most required. But this one gleam of light was speedily quenched, for Onesiphorus caught the prison fever, and died at Rome.

Nero himself presided at the first trial of the Apostle. The crime which the Emperor had committed against the Christians was so enormous that the recollection of it haunted him, and intensified his hatred. He would not lose the opportunity of condemning the greatest of the Christian leaders. Paul was conducted to the basilica in the Golden House. It was a hall of the utmost splendour. The floor was of mosaic, in which porphyry, and serpentine, and giallo antico blended their soft lustres in patterns of wonderful variety and grace. The pillars were of light-green cipollino, the walls were inlaid with pavonazzetto from the Apennines near Pisa, and their cornices of alabaster were sculptured with animals, and dolphins, and winged figures. The Emperor sat in the centre of the apse, which was divided from the body of the hall by a balustrade of white marble. His gilded and ivory chair was elevated on an inlaid pavement, approached by steps of porphyry. Round him stood a group of Prætorians with their silver eagles and other military ensigns. The lictors with their axed fasces stood at the back of his chair, and near him on lower seats sat Tigellinus, Eprius Marcellus, Cossutianus Capito, and other informers who had recently been enriched with the spoils of the innocent. Not far from these were some of the leading Jews, and conspicuous among

them were the High Priest Ishmael, the alabarch Tiberius Alexander the unworthy nephew of Philo, and the foxy features of that arch-impostor, the magician Simon.

The great prisoner was made to stand in front of the balustrade on the spot marked by a circle of giallo antico on the floor. His hands were fastened together with a long coupling chain. The two chief Ephesian accusers, Alexander the coppersmith, and Demetrius the silversmith, were animated with the keenest hatred. And Paul was left absolutely alone. Onesimus and Luke accompanied him to the entrance, but they were both 'suspects,' and were not permitted to enter. But there were Gentiles and soldiers who might have helped him had they chosen, and the Apostle would not have been human if he had not felt the bitterness of desertion. 'At my first trial,' he wrote to Timothy, 'no man took his place at my side. All abandoned me. God forgive them!' In all that city, where his previous bonds had made the Gospel known alike in the Palace and the camp; in that world, for which he had sacrificed his life in loftiest services, there was no patron to protect, no advocate to support him, no favourable witness to plead extenuation. But he felt and said that One more powerful than many legions stood by him — even the Lord whom he had served.

Nero was in his most savage mood, and Tigellinus as always, added fuel to his rage. He insulted Paul, he glared upon him, he roared at him, he attempted to browbeat him, with utter violation of every principle of justice. Paul was a man the very sight of whom naturally inspired Nero with ferocity. For Nero, whom all the world knew to be a robber, a poisoner, a murderer, a matricide — a sensualist, effeminate, degraded, and unutterably depraved — had become aware that these Christians lived lives of purity and holiness, the possibility of which he affected to deny. And his guilty splendour and luxurious misery were forced at last to blush and tremble before the irresistible weakness of that despised, ragged, fettered prisoner. For Paul did not in the least fear him, and Paul's courage was so marvellous to those who were accustomed to the pusillanimity of senators, who went away and committed suicide if Nero did but frown at them, that the courtiers and soldiers turned their eyes from the purple of the world's master to gaze upon the rags of this

sick prisoner who stood there with his pale countenance, his stooping figure and thin sable-silvered hair, more dauntless in chains, and under the axe of doom, than the Emperor amid his guards.

The first trial turned on Ephesian accusations of riot and disorder, and Paul, producing the diploma of his franchise, stood on his rights as a Roman citizen. He demanded to answer for himself, and, in the manly speech which he made, the chained ambassador of Christ struck a feeling akin to terror into the heart of the deified autocrat of heathendom. He was able to prove by the written evidence of the Recorder of Ephesus, and of friendly Asiarchs, that the testimony of the metal-workers was false, and that he had ever behaved as a peaceable citizen. The calm dignity of his defence, and the perfect courtesy and fearlessness which he had shown in his desperate position, left a deep impression on the jurors. Eprius Marcellus tried to cow him with that Hercules-Furens style of oratory which had so often driven the blood from the cheeks of consulars and generals. But when Paul turned on him his quiet glance, Eprius Marcellus stopped short, stammered in the middle of a sentence, and ignominiously sat down, muttering something about 'the evil eye.'

In spite of Nero's scorn and anger, the jurors voted in accordance with their convictions. When the votes were counted in the urn there were a few C.s for *Condemno* dropped by Court sycophants, but most of the tablets were A. for *Absolvo* and N. L. for *Non Liquet*, 'not proven.' To the astonishment of all, this first offence ended in acquittal on the first capital charge, and *ampliatio* — the postponement of the trial — for the examination of the second count. The second count was that Paul was a Christian, and, as such, the adherent of an illegal religion. On this he knew that he could not escape; but of the result of the first trial he wrote to Timothy with heartfelt gratitude that 'God had saved him out of the mouth of the lion.'

There was nothing to cheer his cold and rocky prison except the light within his soul, and that human tenderness which, when all others had deserted him, was still lavished upon him by Onesimus and Luke. The Evangelist did all that was in his power to keep alive in Rome the flickering flame which the violence of persecution had overwhelmed.

In this way Onesimus could do but little. He regarded it as the present work of his life to console and tend the Apostle, and he devoted himself to this work with all the more thoroughness because, when he was able to visit Aricia, Junia impressed him with its necessity and sacredness. He had his reward; for day by day he himself advanced in righteousness and knowledge, as he listened to words which have helped forward the regeneration of the world.

BOOK III

'ATROPOS OCCAT'

CHAPTER LXII

NERO IN GREECE

'Hæc opera atque hæ sunt generosi Principis artes
Gaudentis fœdo peregrina ad pulpita cantu
Prostitui, Graiæque apium meruisse coronæ.'

JUV. *Sat.* viii. 224.

NERO grew weary of Rome. While he was there he could not wholly exclude the voice of the conscience of mankind which awoke echoes in his own. With art, and æsthetics, and the race-course, and the theatre, he tried to create around him the elements of a sham and shadowy world. It was a world filled with the ghosts of crime and weird with insensate projects and monstrous revellings. He had attempted everything, abused everything, polluted everything, and 'the scoriac river of passion accursed,' of which he drank so freely, did but consume and burn up his powers. He had become like a dead thing in a wilderness of dead capacities, inspired at once by 'insatiable desires and incurable disgusts.' While he played the god he sank lower than Christian eye can follow him, into the beast. With Domitian, Tiberius, Caligula, and Helagabalus — with Vitellius, Commodus, and Maximin — he was one of a group of Cæsars who have been set forth last on the stage of history, a spectacle to angels and to men to show that human nature can sink into 'half beast and half devil' when there are no restraints to save men from all that is most abject. They became, as St. Paul said, inventors of evil; not only doers of whatsoever things are vile, whatsoever things are infamous, whatsoever things are of ill report, but also delighters in those that do them.

But at Rome, even in his beloved theatre, Nero was not safe from insults. They scorched him as with the touch of flame, and yet were so impalpable that he could not avenge them unless he put a whole population to death. Opposite

his Palace, or on the outer circus, were written, in chalk or coal, denunciations so stinging as to show that if blank walls are the paper of fools they may also be the avengers of tyrants. One of these pasquinades hailed him as the true descendant of Æneas, since Æneas 'took off' his father, Nero his mother. Another criticised the over-grown space of the Golden House, and bade the Quirites to emigrate to Veii, if the House did not forestall them by extending so far. Yet another reminded him that the Parthian could be an Apollo with his arrows no less than Nero with his harp.

He pretended indifference to these things, but he felt them, and longed to find a fresh scene for display. At Rome he considered that his musical talent, though he had exhibited it to the promiscuous populace, was yet a flower which blushed unseen. The astute and adulatory Greeks had sent him the crowns of all their citharœdic contests. He was delighted, and asked their delegates to supper. When they begged him to give them a specimen of his powers, they went into such ecstasies over his performance that he said the Greeks were the only connoisseurs who were worthy of his proficiency.

To Greece, therefore, he set forth with a retinue which would have sufficed for the conquest of India, only that they were more concerned with masks and robes and musical instruments than with arms. He was accompanied, too, by all his train of minions, as well as by an army of *claqueurs*. When he appeared at Naples he was so enchanted by the 'Kentish fire' of some Alexandrians who were present — a mode of applause which was new to him — that he took a number of these Egyptians into his service. He had also trained a band of youths of equestrian rank, and more than five thousand of the lustiest plebeians to act together in bands and learn certain modes of cheering, which were called 'buzzings,' 'tiles,' and 'jars.' They were mostly boys, and were arrayed in fine dresses, with their thick hair shining with perfumes, and with rings on their left hands.

With such accompaniments he might feel tolerably secure of victory, yet when he appeared at a contest he always felt or pretended a girlish timidity. The Emperor of Rome might be seen on the stage of Greek towns bending his knee before the mob, humbly adoring them with his hands, assuring the judges that he had done his little best, tremblingly solicitous

to observe the slightest rules, and perspiring with anxiety if he made the smallest mistake. Besides this, he debased himself with all the pettiest intrigues of tenth-rate theatrical life. He defamed his competitors, or bribed them not to do their best, or cajoled them to cede the victory to him. When an Epirot, with a fine voice, refused to cede the prize unless Nero paid him ten talents, he was pushed against a column by Nero's clique and stabbed to death. It required the power of the Emperor to secure the rewards of the comedian.

Without believing, or even alluding to, the deeds recorded of him by Dion Cassius, it is clear that his plunderings, and crimes, and secret orgies continued unabated. From the Thespians he stole the Cupid of Praxiteles in Pentelic marble; from the Pisatans of Olympia the statue of Ulysses among the Greek chiefs drawing lots to answer the challenge of Hector. Rich men were proscribed in consequence of secret delations, which often sprang from the greed of the detestable Calvia Crispinilla, who was now the keeper of the wardrobe of Sporus. They were struck down, unheard, and their possessions were divided. Rome had been left under the government of two ex-slaves, Helius and Polycletus, who were so rapacious that the people complained of being under two Neros instead of one.

Amid such crimes little was thought of the fate of Paris. The poor pantomime, whose beauty, grace, and skill had been the delight of Rome, had excited the jealousy of Nero because he could not teach him how to dance. Paris, like Aliturus, had been no better than a slave, and we cannot blame him too severely if, in such an age and such surroundings, he had been stained by the vices in the midst of which he lived, and his nature, not originally ignoble, had been

> 'subdued
> To what it wrought in, like the dyer's hand.'

But his death, like that of Roscius, 'eclipsed the gaiety of nations,' and gave one warning more — had it been needed — to Aliturus, that the friendship of tyrants means death.

But the worst of these Grecian enormities — many of which cannot be narrated — involved the acme of treachery and ingratitude. No man had shed a purer lustre over the age of Nero than the brave and honest Corbulo. His life

had been devoted to the service of the Empire. To him had been due those splendid victories which kept the Parthians in check, and induced Tiridates to put the colophon on Nero's glory by coming to receive at his hands before the Roman people the diadem of Armenia. Well might the Arsacid tell Nero that in Corbulo he had a good slave. The great victorious general had spent his life in foreign service. He had never come near the Court; had received no civil honours; had never returned to enjoy a triumph or an ovation. He had been content to keep himself away from those scenes of gilded slavery and miserable splendour, and perhaps anticipated the sole reward which tyrants can give to true greatness. Now, however, that Nero was in Greece, he wrote to Corbulo a letter of almost filial reverence, and invited him to come and receive proofs of his gratitude. To refuse would have been tantamount to rebellion, and Corbulo had always been stainlessly loyal to his worthless master. But good men invariably have their slanderers, and one of his officers, Arrius Varus, had been whispering suspicions about him into the Emperor's ear. He was not granted so much as an audience. No sooner had he landed at Cenchreæ than Nero sent him the command to die. Corbulo wasted no words on execration or complaint. For a moment, perhaps, it flashed across him that he would have been wiser to listen to the voice of Rome and of the East, which had invited him to be their liberator. But it was too late to repent of the fault of putting trust in a monster. He drew his sword and stabbed himself with the single word 'Deserved!'[1]

We cannot wonder that Nero did not visit Sparta, because every tradition of Sparta would have cried shame on his histrionic effeminacy. He did not visit Athens, because Athens did not deign to invite him, and because he shrank from eliciting a keenness of wit which had not spared the blood-stained Sylla. But his chief reason for avoiding 'the Eye of Greece' was because he dreaded the Temple of the Furies, who had avenged the less guilty and more expiable matricide of Orestes. Nor did he dare to visit Eleusis, because the voice of the herald forbade the profane to be initiated into its mysteries. He did not even venture to present himself to the hierophants of the little mysteries of Agra on the

[1] Note 51.

banks of the Ilissus. Visits opened to the humblest, and mysteries revealed to the simplest of the pure, were barred to him.

And before his journey was over, amid his sham triumphs, he began to be disturbed by disquieting rumours.

Judæa was in a state of violent revolt, and the presence of an able general was urgently needed. Nero therefore appointed Vespasian to the command. The old general was expiating in seclusion and obscurity the crime of having snored while Nero sang. One day an Imperial messenger was announced at his humble home. His blood ran cold, for he made sure that the soldier brought him an order to die. Instead of that he brought a nomination to the government of Judæa and the command of the army. To these high offices Nero appointed him because a man of valour and military ability was wanted. Nero overlooked what he called his want of taste because, though eminent as a soldier, he was a man of such humble name and origin that he could not possibly be regarded as dangerous. But the revolt of the Jews, though it was a serious matter, was far less alarming than the other news which now reached Nero.

Helius wrote to say that affairs in the city urgently required his presence. 'You summon me back,' he wrote in reply; 'your wish ought rather to be that I should return worthy of Nero.' But the menace of disaster was too grave to admit of its being neglected for a verbal pomposity, and Helius hurried to Corinth in person to rouse the Emperor from his insensate frivolity. The weather was so stormy that his enemies fondly hoped for his shipwreck if he sailed. Delay, however, was impossible. His day of doom was close at hand.

CHAPTER LXIII

MUTTERING THUNDER

Αἰεὶ τὸ μὲν ζῇ, τὸ δὲ μεθίσταται κακόν,
τὸ δ' ἐκπέφηνεν αὖθιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς νέον.

EURIPIDES.

THE insistency of Helius, and the alarming reports which reached Nero from all quarters, roused him at last from his intoxication of frivolous vanity and compelled him to cut short the 'ignoble masquerade with which he had soiled Greece.' But he would not reveal the least consciousness of alarm, and, indeed, in the madness of the moment, he did not realise it. What did it matter if he was deposed? 'All the world,' he used to say, 'supports art,' and he could easily gain his living as a favourite harpist or singer on the public stage. The glory of the actor, won by his own talents, should be more dazzling than the diadem of the Emperor, which was but the heritage of his race!

He first entered Naples, because there he had made his first stage appearance. He entered it as a *hieronices*, riding in a chariot drawn by four milk-white steeds, through a breach made in the walls. He made the same magnificent entry into Antium, dear to him as the place of his birth, and into Alba, the city where the Temple of Jupiter Latiaris was venerated by the entire Latin race. But he reserved for Rome the fullest magnificence of a triumph heretofore undreamed of, and such as might well cause every true Roman to blush for shame. He degraded to his ignoble purpose the chariot in which Augustus had triumphed after the battle of Actium. His robe was of purple; over it flowed a chlamys gleaming with golden stars; on his brow he wore the olive wreath of the Olympic victors; in his right hand he carried the laurel crown of Pythia. Seated in the chariot by his side was no brave soldier or noble statesman, but Diodorus the harpist! Before him went a long procession of heralds, each carrying some garland of victory,

with tablets on which were inscribed the names of those whom he had conquered, and the songs or tragedies in which he had gained the prize. Thousands of the trained applauders whom he called *Augustiani*, followed his chariot proclaiming themselves the soldiers and comrades of his successes. An arch of the Circus Maximus had been broken down for him, and through it he made his way along the Velabrum and the Forum, not to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, or to that of Mars the Avenger, but to the Palace and the temple of his patron Apollo. The Senate had gone forth in festal robes to meet and greet him. As the champing steeds tossed their white manes and bore him slowly along, every door and window and roof and lattice was crowded with spectators, and the air was rent with shouts of 'Hail, Olympic, hail, Pythic victor! Hail, sole *periodonices!*[1] Augustus, Augustus! Hail, Nero-Hercules! Nero-Apollo! Hail, sacred voice! Happy are they who hear it!' In street after street victims were immolated as he passed; showers of fragrant saffron were sprinkled down; the air was rich with the perfume of incense burning on hundreds of altars; birds and little ornaments, and jewels and flowers were scattered over him. It rained roses from the balconies full of matrons and maidens. Of his eighteen hundred and eight crowns he arranged the choicest in his own bedchamber and around his bed. The rest he sent in masses to adorn the great Egyptian obelisk which Augustus had reared to be the goal of the Circus Maximus.

Such men as the consuls of the year — the dull poet Silius Italicus and the orator Trachalus — might estimate highly the successes of a comedian, but the indignant shade of Thrasea might have rejoiced in its Elysian fields to have been spared the sight of such a triumph!

But so far from being ashamed, Nero henceforth made his celestial voice his chief concern. As it was too precious to be wasted in addressing crass Prætorians, he contented himself with sending messages to them, or having his addresses read aloud in his presence. What he had to say to the Senate was similarly read by one of the consuls. An attendant whom he called a *phonascus* stood constantly at his side to warn him to be careful of his throat, and to keep a handkerchief before his mouth. Whoever extolled his

[1] 'Conqueror in all the games.'

wretched voice was his friend; whoever praised it insufficiently was his enemy.

It is part of the subtle irony of history that the zenith of apparent prosperity is often the culminating moment of misfortune, and the scene of most splendid exaltation is that in which the fingers of a man's hand steal forth and write on the palace-wall the flashing messages of doom. The triumph of the sole *periodonices* whom the world had ever seen was the last hour of his sham glory. The patience of God and man was exhausted, and 'down rushed the thunderbolt.'

Romans might be too deeply abased to avenge the degradation of their name by the latest of those triumphs which seemed to cover with ridiculous parody the three hundred which had preceded it. But there was yet a Gaul brave enough to arouse the Empire from its fatal apathy.

His name was Julius Vindex, and he was the Proprætor of Celtic Gaul. He was rich, and he was a senator, as his father had been before him, for Claudius had granted this distinction to the descendant of the ancient kings of Aquitania. Nero envied his wealth, but Vindex, in order to make the greedy parasites of the Court think that he would soon die and leave them his possessions, drank cumin-water and made himself artificially pale. In Gaul he received constant news of Nero's villainies both paltry and heinous, and his soul burned within him. He sounded the Gallic militia to discover whether they were as much ashamed and weary as himself of the tyranny of a comedian and a monster. He found them ripe for rebellion. He had no personal objects. He knew that a Gaul could hardly be Emperor, and he secretly offered the Empire to Galba. On March 16, A.D. 68, he gave, a little too prematurely, the signal of revolt. Nero had gone to Naples to refresh himself and to rest his precious voice, and there he received the news of the insurrection on March 19, the anniversary of the murder of his mother.

The idiotic frivolity with which he acted upon such serious intelligence astonished even his courtiers. He only laughed, and pretended to rejoice at the opportunity which would thus be afforded him of spoiling the wealthiest of the provinces. He went into the gymnasium, and watched with affected transport the contests of the athletes. At supper still more

perilous tidings reached him, but he contented himself with saying, 'Woe to the rebels!' Meanwhile the walls of Rome were scrawled over with satirical inscriptions. Yet for eight days he took no step whatever, answered no letters, gave no orders, attempted to get over the peril by calmly ignoring it. His long impunity had made him a fatalist. Had not Britain been lost and recovered? Had not Armenia been lost and recovered? Whatever happened, was he not promised an Eastern kingdom, or could he not support himself by his voice and lyre?

A few days later came an edict of Vindex, in which he spoke of Nero as Ahenobarbus, which angered Nero as much as it angered Henry VII. to be described by Richard III. as 'one Henry Tidder or Tudor.' Vindex also described Nero as a wretched twangler on the harp. Now indeed he was furious. To call him a wretched twangler! Did any of his friends know of a better harpist than himself? Was not such a criticism a proof of ignorance and bad taste? Let the Senate rouse itself to avenge him! He would come in person, but that he felt a certain weakness in his throat.

Messenger after messenger came spurring to Naples, and Nero was compelled to hurry back in alarm to Rome. Vindex was by this time at the head of a hundred thousand men, yet Nero quite recovered his spirits when, on his road to Rome, he saw the statue of a Gaulish soldier subdued and dragged by the hair by a Roman knight. At the sight of it he leapt up for joy, and adored heaven. When he reached Rome, instead of summoning an assembly of the Senate and the people to meet him, he only invited a few leading men to the Palace, and after a brief consultation, spent the afternoon in showing them new kinds of hydraulic organs. 'I intend to display them all on the stage,' he said — with the affected afterthought 'if Vindex will let me.'

When Galba first received the secret overtures of Vindex he temporised. He had only preserved his life under various tyrants by consummate care, and by affecting a policy of submission and indifference. Vindex implored him to constitute himself 'the leader and avenger of the human race,' but he took no step until he discovered that Nero had sent secret orders that he was to be murdered, and found that he had only escaped very narrowly and by the merest accident.

Besides, as his officer T. Vinius reminded him, he had hesitated in his allegiance, and to hesitate was to be lost. He must either assume the purple or prepare to die.

The fresh intelligence that Galba and the two provinces of Spain had also revolted, struck Nero with panic. He swooned away, and remained for some time speechless and motionless. On recovering his senses he tore his robe, and beat his head, with the cry, 'I am ruined!' His nurse tried to console him with the remark that other Princes had suffered similar calamities. 'Nay,' he answered, 'my fate is more unheard of than that of all others, for *I* lose the Empire while yet I live.' Some steps were suggested to him. He recalled some troops from Illyria, and put Petronius Turpilianus at the head of such forces as he could secure. He set a price on the head of Vindex, and Vindex replied with the 'sublime gasconade,' 'Nero promises ten million sesterces to any one who will bring him my head. I promise my head to any one who will bring me his.' But scarcely a single plan occurred to Nero which was not puerile; not one measure which was not monstrous. He would execute the provincial governors, and appoint new ones. He would send round to the islands and kill all the exiles, for they might join the revolters. He would order a general massacre of all the Gauls in Rome, for they might favour their countrymen. He would give up the Gallic provinces to be plundered by the soldiers. He would invite the whole Senate to a banquet, and poison them. He deposed the two consuls appointed himself sole consul, and as he left the banquet, leaning on the shoulders of his intimates, he declared that he would present himself before the legions unarmed and weeping; and, when he had melted their hearts by his tears, he would sing strains of victory to the rejoicing soldiers — which he must immediately compose. Above this 'lugubrious buffoonery' he could not rise!

His other preparations to meet the crisis — such as they were — bore the same stamp of infructuous folly. They were all tainted with vanity, imbecility, and corruption. In choosing vehicles for his expedition, his chief care was about those which were necessary for his stage properties. The women who were to accompany him had their hair cut short to make them look like Amazons, and were armed with axes and targets. In raising money he was very fastidious that the

silver should be freshly minted and the gold fine. Many flatly refused to contribute, exclaiming that he ought to get back the sums with which the informers had been gorged to repletion. He was made daily to feel that his power was gone. When he summoned the city tribes to renew their oath of allegiance, and to enrol themselves as soldiers, the result was such a failure that he had to order each household to furnish a proportionate number of slaves. Among these he would only enrol the most approved, not even excepting stewards and secretaries.

But he had to submit to the agony of daily insults. The people were suffering from famine prices, and the arrival of an Alexandrian corn-vessel was announced. This always gave an occasion for rejoicing, but when it turned out that the vessel was only laden with a cargo of Nile sand to sprinkle over the arena, there was an outburst of rage and contumely. Scoffs at his chariot-racing and singing were heard everywhere. Burghers pretended to get up quarrels with their slaves at night, and then shouted *Vindex! Vindex!* as though they were merely appealing to the police. Nor was this all. He was tormented with dreams and portents of every description, which made his days and nights hideous. He dreamt that he was steering a ship, and that some one wrenched the helm out of his hand; that his murdered wife Octavia dragged him into the nethermost abyss; that he was covered over with a multitude of winged ants. There was a stateliness and tragic sense of condemnation in another of his dreams, in which the ideal statues of the nations at Pompey's theatre sprang to life, surrounded him, and blocked his path. It was rumoured that on the first day of the year, the Lares had fallen down in the middle of a sacrifice, and that the great gates of the mausoleum of his family had opened spontaneously, while a voice came from their awful recesses which summoned him by name. When a solemn rite was to be performed at the Capitol, the keys were nowhere to be found. When his speech against Vindex was pronounced in the Senate, and he said that 'criminals should soon meet the end they had deserved,' the senators had joined in an ill-omened shout of approval. It was noticed, too, that the last tragedy which he had chanted in public was that of 'Œdipus in Exile,' and that the last verse which he had spoken was —

'Wife, Mother, Father, join to bid me die.'

If, on receiving the news of the revolt of Vindex, he had put himself, like a true Roman Emperor, at the head of his legions, the terrible prestige of a Cæsar, the remembered failure of previous conspiracies, and the disunion of his enemies, might have secured his triumph. For the German legions of Verginius Rufus disdained to follow the initiative of the Gauls. Their own general refused the Empire, and declared for Galba; but an unhappy and accidental collision between the jealous cohorts led to a battle in which twenty thousand Gauls were left dead upon the field. Vindex, in despair, stabbed himself with his own sword. Galba, in scarcely less despair, meditated suicide at Clunia, hearing that the soldiers of Verginius were anything but favourable to his claims. If but one pulse of true blood of his brave patrician ancestors had stirred in the veins of Nero, if he could have shown but one momentary flash of their spirit, he would have been gloriously saved. But his abuse of passion, his disgraced manhood, his polluted mind, his enervated frame, stamped upon him the curse of nullity, and the infamous throng of contaminated courtiers who formed his band of intimates were as empty and effeminate as himself. No strength was left among them to evoke the ghost of a manly sentiment in that sty of transformed humanity in which they had long voluntarily wallowed. No heart was left them to do, or dare, or even nobly to die.

And so Nero, while sitting at dinner, received fresh letters, telling him that his sluggishness and ineptitude had alienated from him the last semblance of allegiance among the legions; Otho had declared against him in Lusitania; Clodius Macer, in Africa; Vespasian, more or less covertly, in Syria. The bitterness of death was come, if it was not passed. In petulant passion he tore the letters to pieces. Then, like a spoilt boy in a rage, he seized from the table two crystal cups, of priceless value, of which he was specially fond, and which were embossed with scenes from Homer, and dashed them to shivers on the marble floor.

More wild and wicked follies suggested themselves to his diseased and whirling brain. Why should he not again set fire to the city, and prevent all attempts to extinguish the

flames, by sending to the vivaria of the amphitheatre, and letting loose all the wild beasts among the people? What a scene it would be! Lions, and tigers, and bears, and panthers, growling, leaping, roaring, amid the streets of a city bursting everywhere into conflagration, and — while themselves wild with terror — striking fresh terror into a screaming populace! Incapable of consecutive thought, he had not even considered what would come of this. Suffice it that it would be a magnificent excitement, a thrilling and supreme sensation! He did not repent of this design; he was not appalled by the stupendous and selfish wickedness; he was only deterred by the impossibility of carrying it out. It may be said that such schemes betray the madman; but Nero's brain was undisturbed by any madness except that which consists in, and is the Nemesis of, a soul eaten away by conceit, selfishness, and lust. Caligula, it has been truly said, would, in modern days, have found his way to Bedlam; but Nero to Tyburn. His hour was come. He sent his most trusted freedman to Ostia to prepare the fleet. He sounded the tribunes and centurions of the Prætorian guard to see if they would share his flight. Some of them made excuses; some flatly refused; one of them even dared to quote to him the line: 'Is it so very difficult to die?' As for his Præfects — Tigellinus, whom he had laden with wealth and honours; Nymphidius, the son of a slave-woman — creatures who had crawled and sunned themselves in the noon of his prosperity, they shamelessly and without hesitation betrayed and abandoned him. The poisonous sunlight of his favour had bred no creature nobler than adders. What should he do? Should he array himself in his tragic robe and present himself as a suppliant before the Parthians, or before Galba, moving them to tears by his histrionic skill? But how could he get so far in safety? No; he would clothe himself in black garments, would go to the Forum, and there would weep before the Rostra, imploring pardon for the past, and begging the people — if only he succeeded in moving their minds — at least to allow him to be Præfect of Egypt in place of Tiberius Alexander! He even wrote the oration which he intended to deliver on the occasion, and it was found in his writing-desk after his death. His one dread was that, if he so much as ventured outside the gates of the Golden House, he would be torn to

pieces before he could make his way to the Forum. He postponed the decision, and, summoning Locusta, obtained from her a poison which he placed in a golden box. Then he passed over to his favourite retreat in the Servilian gardens, and slept as well as he could his last wretched sleep on earth.

CHAPTER LXIV

AT THE THREE FOUNTAINS

'For out of prison he cometh to reign.' — Eccl. iv. 14.

'Lieblich wie der Iris Farbenfeuer
Auf der Donnerwolke duft'gem Thau
Schlimmert durch der Wehmuth düstern Schleier
Hier der Ruhe heitres Blau.' — Schiller.

After his first defence, the Apostle Paul had lived on in his narrow prison, indomitably cheerful though death stood almost visibly beside him. Himself undaunted, he strove to kindle the same faith and courage in those whom he loved. He had heard that Timothy was sad and despondent, and had not got over the grief of being separated from him. The Apostle had a deep human yearning to see once again the dear companion of his earlier conflicts. He wrote to him the beautiful, pathetic letter which contains for us his last words. He exhorted him to strenuous cheerfulness, and urged him to face the shame of the Gospel at Rome, and to come and share his sufferings. 'Come, my child' — such was the burden of his message — 'come before winter; come quickly; come, or it will be too late.' And when he comes let him send to Carpus at Troas for the large cloak which Paul had left at his house in the hurry and tumult of his arrest, and the books, especially the parchments. It is often cold in his prison, and that old 'dreadnought,' which he had woven with his own hands out of the black goat's-hair of his native province, old as it was, and often whitened with the dust of the long Roman roads, and drenched in the water-torrents of the Taurus, and stained with the brine of Adria, would yet be a comfort to him as he sat on the rocky floor. And the papyrus books and the parchments — few and worn as they were — would help to while away the monotonous hours, and were very dear to him. With some of them he had been familiar ever since he

was a happy boy in the dear old Tarsian home. So when Timothy comes to shed the last rays of life's sunshine on Paul's prison, let him bring the old cloak and the books — poor inventory of a saint's possessions after unequalled labours for mankind! And let him, if possible, bring Mark the Evangelist with him; for Peter, with whom Mark had travelled, had now sealed his testimony by martyrdom, and Mark's knowledge of Latin might be serviceable, and his personal tendence would be very dear. The immediate danger of arrest would not be great, for the rage of the informers had now been glutted to repletion, and the State and the Emperor had more than enough to occupy their thoughts. Pudens and Claudia had written to him with all affection from their British home, and had sent to minister to his necessities. He gives to Timothy the greetings which they had sent supposing him to be at Rome. Linus had also sent greetings, in a letter dictated from his bed of death. As for himself, he was more than ready to die. He had finished his course; he had kept the faith; henceforth there was laid up for him the crown of righteousness. Thinking, perhaps, how Pætus Thrasea and Seneca had sprinkled their blood as a libation to Jupiter the Liberator, he wrote the striking words, 'I am being already poured out in libation, and the time of my setting sail is close at hand.' Was he heavy at the thought? Not so. He quotes a fragment of a fine early Christian hymn which had consoled many a martyrdom: —

> 'If we died, we shall also live with Him;
> If we endure, we shall also reign with Him;
> If we deny Him, He will deny us.
> If we are faithless, He abideth faithful.
> He is not able to deny Himself.'

And thus the old man's soul was joyful in the Lord.
Did Mark, did Timothy come to him

> 'Before the white sail of his soul had rounded
> The misty cape, the promontory Death'?

Mark was at Alexandria, and Timothy did not see him. The Lycaonian hastened to Rome the moment he had received Paul's letter, but he came too late — came to be himself imprisoned, though happily only for a time. The Apostle was not mistaken in saying that his death was imminent. Dur-

ing Nero's absence in Greece he had been summoned before the two wretched freedmen, Helius and Polycletus, on the second ground of his indictment — that he was a Christian, and therefore the preacher of a forbidden religion. That cause needed no trial. The accused not only confessed, but gloried in the accusation. Defence, therefore, was superfluous, since no apology for Christianity could alter the now established law that its practice was prohibited on pain of death. He would have been put to death at once, but Nero in a letter from Greece had expressed some wish to see him, and to ask him some further questions about the Christians before he attached his sign manual to the order of execution.

The truth was that Nero was half mad with anxiety, and as all magic incantations had failed to give him the least inkling of the future, he desired to learn something from the Christians. Among the slaves in the Palace who had been denounced as Christians by the informers, Herodion only had been spared, not only because of his age and blameless fidelity, but also because, in a household where the buzz of incessant gossip made it impossible to keep anything secret, it had been generally rumoured that he possessed the gift of prophecy. Nero therefore summoned Herodion into his presence. But Herodion refused to speak, and Nero, in a transport of fury, unsheathed his dagger, and held it over the poor old slave with his uplifted hand. But Herodion's countenance did not blench, and he said with perfect calmness —

'O Cæsar, thou canst not kill me if thou wilt.'

'How? *canst* not?' said the Emperor, stooping to pick up the dagger, which had dropped from his astonished grasp. '*Canst* not? One step, one thrust, and thou art a dead man.'

'Canst not,' said Herodion, with unmoved serenity. 'I shall die, indeed, but it is not thus, nor by thy hand, that I shall die.'

'Lead him off to death,' said Nero. 'These fanatics are inexplicable.'

But his yearning to divine the future was only intensified, and Simon Magus persuaded him that he might learn it from the imprisoned Apostle, whom he represented as a powerful sorcerer.

Once more, therefore, the Apostle stood face to face with the Emperor, on one of the troubled tumultuous days which followed his hasty return from Naples, after he had received the news of the revolt of Vindex. It was an interview, not a judicial audience. The Emperor saw him in private, with no one about him except a few trusted freedmen, and one favourite slave, named Patroclus. Several amulets lay scattered round him to avert magic and the evil eye. For form's sake he first asked the Apostle about the crimes with which Christians were charged, and heard once more the proofs of their righteousness, loyalty, and holiness. Then he offered Paul his freedom and pardon if he would reveal to him the future. Onesimus, who had been allowed to attend the Apostle, and who stood at the far end of the apartment among a group of slaves, used to say afterwards that if the Apostle would only have spoken a word of hope, or even some ambiguous promise which might be interpreted in almost any way, the chains would have been struck off his hands. But he answered that the secrets of the future were in the hands of God alone, and that he had no commission to reveal them. Nero was scanning his features with intense anxiety, and as the Apostle fixed on him his earnest, undaunted, pitying gaze, the Emperor — more than ever convinced that he could prophesy the unknown — told all the slaves except Phaon and Patroclus to withdraw. But Paul, weak with long imprisonment, and scarcely able to stand, begged that he might support his weary frame on the shoulder of Onesimus. Otherwise they were alone. The Emperor, who had no dignity at that hour of calamity, appealed to his prisoner. 'They tell me,' he said, 'that thy God, or thy Chrestus, *does* enable thee to foretell events to come. I am in danger. The legions are revolting against me on all sides. The astrologers have promised me that I shall be King of Jerusalem. All is uncertain. See, I appeal to thee. I, the Emperor, ask thee, the doomed and wretched Jew, to tell me what will happen. Will Vindex conquer? Will Galba conquer? Will the guards be faithful? Shall I be murdered? Answer me these questions, and I will spare thy life, and send thee away with rich rewards.'

'I answer,' said the Apostle, 'as a Prophet of the East answered a king before. If Nero should give me his house

full of silver and gold, yet cannot I go beyond the word of the Lord; and the Lord has not bidden me to speak to thee. And what were wealth, and what were all the Empire to me? Thinkest thou, O Emperor, that I fear death? To us Christians to die is to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better; and Christ hath conquered death.'

'Wilt thou not even tell me whether I shall be killed? I adjure thee by thy Christ, or thy Iao, or whatever thou holdest most sacred, tell me!'

The Emperor was trembling and weeping.

Another might have scorned his unmanliness, or rejoiced with malignant triumph over the disgrace of the enemy of all the good. But Paul knew too much of human weakness to indulge in scorn. He felt for him a sincere, a trembling, a yearning pity. He uplifted his eyes to heaven, paused for a moment, during which the Emperor's eager and almost imploring gaze was fixed upon his face, and then solemnly replied —

'Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live.'

'Tell me more,' said Nero passionately.

'I may not tell thee more. Only,' he continued, raising his chained hand, 'I say to thee, repent! Repent of thy life of crime and infamy! Repent of thy many murders — the murder of thy brother, the murder of thy mother, of —'

'Accursed Jew, darest thou revile me?' said Nero, leaping up from his gilded chair, his face burning with fury.

The Apostle remained unmoved. Onesimus told afterwards that he had not felt the tremor of a single muscle as the storm of the Emperor's rage burst over him. Nero stood amazed — his wrath stilled before so majestic an indifference.

'Tell me more,' he said again, in a voice of entreaty.

'Think, rather,' said the Apostle, 'that thy hour of judgment is nigh at hand — yea, it standeth at the door. The blood of the innocent, slain by thee, cries against thee from the ground. I pity thee — Paul the prisoner, Paul the aged, pities thee, and he will pray for thee if haply the thoughts of thy heart, and the shames of thy wickedness, may be forgiven.'

'Dismiss this man,' whispered Phaon to the Emperor, im-

patiently. 'He is a Jew, evidently half insane with dreamings in prison. Were it otherwise, I would here and now chastise his insolence.'

'Nay,' said the boy Patroclus, in a voice of deep emotion. 'Rather listen to him. O Nero, I will confess to thee that I have talked to Acte; I have talked to Christian slaves — once my fellow-slaves — in thy Palace and the household of Narcissus, and I know that the gods — or that God, if (as they say) there be but one God — is with them. Dismiss Paulus, I entreat thee; set him free. He tells the truth.' And with these words the young cupbearer flung himself on his knees with a gesture of appeal.[1]

Nero had been startled — almost moved — by the solemn tones and inspired aspect of the Apostle; but the appeal of Patroclus and his mention of Acte produced a different effect from what the youth had intended. The Emperor was jealous that such potent influences should have been at work in his own Palace; that in spite of his persecution of the Saints, in spite of his having made Christianity an illegal religion, those who had been so near to his own person as Acte and Patroclus should reject his divinity, and own Jesus as their king.

'Thou art bewitched,' he said to Patroclus, rudely pushing the boy aside.

And, unhappily, at that moment Gaditanian strains, accompanied by the words of a gay song, reached his ear from an adjoining room in which some of his light companions and favourites were sitting. The sound awoke all his heartless and incurable frivolity. Bursting into a forced laugh, he said, 'I see there is no more to be got out of this Jew. Take him hence,' he said to the Prætorian in attendance, 'and see that he be led to death as soon as the day shall dawn.'

'He is a Roman citizen,' said the centurion.

'Yes,' said the Emperor. 'He has been tried and condemned. I will here countersign the condemnation which orders him to be beheaded.'

The Apostle spent that last night on earth in sleep as sweet as that of an innocent child. He rose in the morning smiling

[1] Note 52.

and refreshed, and Onesimus was early at the prison to help him in all his last arrangements and preparations. As the soldiers would allow Onesimus, and no one else, to accompany him, he bade an affecting farewell to Luke, who had been for so long a time his beloved physician, and started on his way.

His doom was secret and sudden. At that early morning hour the centurion and soldiers were not likely to be troubled with many spectators. One or two humble Christians from the poorest haunts of the Trastevere would fain have followed, but the soldiers, who were in savage humour from the perilous uncertainty of the times, suffered none of them to attach themselves to the little procession. Hence the death of the Apostle was so lonely and obscure that scarcely a breath of tradition survived to commemorate it to posterity. An ordinary faith might have been overwhelmed by the apparent utterness of failure which had crowned that life of unparalleled exertions for the cause of Christ and for the good of man. Deserted, abandoned, a pauper, a prisoner — the founder, indeed, of Churches, but of Churches some of which were already the prey of Judaisers and of alien heretics, and were cold to him — in the capital of the world, where he seemed to be but an insignificant atom, and where Jew and Pagan were united in irreconcilable hostility to the faith which he had preached — deserted by all them of Asia — no one with him but the poor emancipated slave — yet he was in no sense disillusioned, nor did his faith fail. It did not trouble him that the curtain was about to fall in darkness on one of the noblest and greatest of all human lives. That life seemed to him but as the life of a great sinner whom God had forgiven, whom Christ had saved. The winter of his trials was past, the eternal spring of the resurrection was breathing through the air its heavenly perfume.

Along the Appian road they passed, through the gate of Rome which still — nigh upon two thousand years afterwards — is called by his name. They passed the pyramid of Gaius Cestius, with all its statues. Only one incident occurred on his journey. Just as they were passing the pyramid of Cestius, a lady, young and deeply veiled, met the mournful procession, and stopped the centurion in command of the soldiers. 'I am Plautilla,' she said, 'the daughter of Flavius Sabinus, the Præ-

fect of the City, the relative of Aulus Plautius and Pomponia Græcina. Suffer me for a moment to speak to your prisoner.'

Impressed by the great names which she had mentioned, the centurion bade the soldiers stand aside for a moment, and Plautilla, kneeling on the grass, asked with tears for the Apostle's blessing. He laid his chained hand on her head and blessed her, and she gave him from her kinswoman Pomponia a handkerchief with which to bind his eyes as he knelt for the blow of the executioner. He gratefully accepted it, and said, 'I know the name of Pomponia. It is ever pronounced with the blessings of the saints of God.'

'Yes,' she said, 'O Apostle, and my brother, the nephew of Vespasian, who is in command in Judæa — he too is a Christian.'

The Apostle upraised in thankfulness his fettered hands. 'The night,' he said, 'is far spent. The day is at hand.'

The centurion beckoned to the soldiers to proceed, and Plautilla stood gazing after them under the shadow of the pyramid.

About three miles from the walls of Rome, on a green and level space amid low, undulating hills, was the spot then known as Aquæ Salviæ, and now as Tre Fontane. To this spot they marched in the early morning — the chained prisoner with the soldiers round him, and the centurion walking at their head. Onesimus followed close behind. The martyr scarcely spoke. His face was lit with an inward rapture; his lips moved incessantly in silent prayer. He had no fear. Lovely to him as the colours of the rainbow on the thundercloud gleamed the azure of his home. They reached the green level under the trees. The prisoner was bidden to kneel down. Onesimus helped him to take off his upper garment, received his last few words of prayer and encouragement and blessing, and the gentle pressure of his hand in farewell. He bound over the Apostle's eyes Plautilla's handkerchief, and then turned away, hiding his face in his hands, weeping as if his heart would break. Then he heard the word of command given. For one instant he looked up — in that instant the sword flashed, and the life of the greatest of the Apostles was shorn away.

The work of the soldiers was over. They had no further concern in the matter, except that the centurion had to certify to Nero that the execution had been carried out. They left the mortal body of the martyr on the green turf. When they were gone, the Christians, whom they had repelled but who had followed them afar off, came to weep over it and to bury it. Onesimus took his part in digging the nameless grave. But the site of it was kept in loving remembrance until in due time there rose over that spot the 'trophy' which existed, as we are told by Gaius the presbyter, as far back as the second century, where now stands in all the splendour of its many-coloured marbles the great church of San Paolo fuori le Mura.

And, as they sorrowfully left the scene of martyrdom, the grey light which had touched the eastern clouds began to flush into the rosy dawn, and the sun rose on the world's new day.

CHAPTER LXV

IN THE CLUTCH OF NEMESIS

'I'll find him out,

. . . . . .

Or drag him by the curls to a foul death,
Cursed as his life.'

MILTON, *Comus.*

'And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy . . . : this also is vanity.' — Eccles. viii. 10.

IT was on the evening of June 8 that Nymphidius Sabinus betrayed Nero, and, by the forged promise of an enormous donative, which was never paid, induced the Prætorians to embrace the cause of Galba. A worthless master makes worthless slaves. This man, whom Nero had lifted out of the dust as a reward for his crimes, sold his bad benefactor without a blush.

Nero heard the grim news before he retired to rest in the evening, and he was well aware that the morrow must decide his fate. At midnight he leapt from his troubled couch, and from that moment there began for him once more the long slow agony of an irremediably shameful death. The first thing he discovered was that all the soldiers who guarded the Palace, and whose barracks were in the Excubitorium, had deserted their posts. In utter despair, he sent for advice to those whom he deemed to be his friends. As he received from them no word of answer, he went to their houses, one by one, in the dead of night, with a few attendants. Inconceivably dreary was that walk through the dark streets, which, as he passed by the silent palaces, seemed to be haunted by the ghosts of the many whom he had slain. But he found every door closed against him. Not a single response was made to his appeals. Almost mad with misery, he returned to his splendid chamber in the Golden House, only to find that during his brief absence the attendants and

slaves had fled, after plundering it of all its magnificence, even to the embroidered purple coverlets and the golden box which contained Locusta's poison. Recalling the memory of his murdered mother, he sought everywhere for the amulet — the bracelet containing the serpent's skin found near his cradle — which Agrippina had clasped upon his boyish arm. But he had once carelessly flung it away, in a fit of petulance, and now it could nowhere be seen. Then he sought for Spicillus, the mirmillo, to stab him; but neither he nor any one else could be found to fulfil the office. 'So,' he said, with one of the small smart epigrams which showed throughout these last scenes that the spirit of melo-drama had not deserted him — 'So, it seems, I have neither a friend nor an enemy!'

Upon this he set out to fling himself into the Tiber, and the back door by which he went led through a part of the circus which had witnessed his disgraceful triumphs. But when he was half way, his courage failed him, and he told his attendants that he wanted some quiet hiding-place in which to collect his thoughts. His freedman Phaon, one of the very few who, to their credit, remained true to him in the hour of his utmost shame, offered him his suburban villa. It was at the fourth milestone from the city, between the Salarian and Nomentan roads. It lay on a more remote path called the Patinarian Way, on the other side of the Anio. On that hot night of June Nero had gone out only in sandals and a tunic; so he threw over his shoulders an old washed-out cloak, covered his head with the hood, held up a handkerchief to conceal his face, and mounted the first sorry horse which could be obtained. Thus, in beggar's guise, he left the gorgeous scene of his manifold iniquities. None were found to accompany him except his secretary Epaphroditus, his freedman Phaon, and Sporus his unhappy favourite. They started together before the first gleam of that most miserable day. The stories that, as he rode, he felt the shock of an earthquake, and saw a flash of lightning which gleamed on the ghostly faces of his victims rising to menace him from the abyss, are doubtless coloured by the agitation of the witnesses. But on his way he had to pass through the Colline gate, and there he heard the shouts of his Prætorians cheering for Galba and cursing Nero. There were but few stirring on

the roads at that early hour, but from one group which they passed they heard the remark, 'These men are in pursuit of Nero.' 'Any news about Nero?' asked another traveller. This was disturbing; but it was a far more serious incident when Nero's horse swerved at the stench of an unburied corpse which lay by the roadside, and the handkerchief fell from his face. For at that moment a discharged Prætorian chanced to pass, who not only recognised but saluted the Emperor, rendering it too certain that the pursuers would soon be on his track.

By this time it was light. It was the anniversary of the murder of his wife, Octavia!

When the fugitives reached the path that led to Phaon's property, they let their horses run loose among the trees and brambles, and made their way to the back of the villa by a track through a bed of reeds where the oozy sludge was sometimes so deep that they had to fling a cloak over it to prevent their sinking in the mire. There was obvious peril in taking refuge here. A great price was sure to be set on Nero's head, and how could the freedman trust his rustic slaves with so perilous a secret? He therefore urged Nero to hide himself in the deep cave of a neighbouring sandpit till something fresh could be devised. But Nero refused. 'What!' he exclaimed tragically, 'go alive into the bowels of the earth?' The only other course was to make an opening in the back of the villa, through which he could creep secretly, unknown to the household. While this was being done, he complained of thirst. There was nothing for him but some stagnant water in a pool. He drank a little from his hand, with the remark, 'This, then, is Nero's choice drink!' He sat down ruefully in his tattered cloak, which had been torn to shreds by the briers through which he had forced his way; and when the hole in the wall was large enough, crawled through it on all fours into the empty cell of one of Phaon's slaves. There he flung himself down on the mean straw pallet of the slave, with nothing to cover him except its old dirty coverlet. Hungry and thirsty as he was, it was difficult to procure him any food without arousing suspicion. They could only get him some black bread, at which his stomach revolted, but he drank a mouthful or two of tepid water.

It became evident to them that all hope of escape or concealment was impossible. The fatal recognition of Nero by the Prætorian betrayed the course he had taken. The numberless mounted pursuers would be sure to find the four horses which they had let loose; nor would it be possible for him to conceal the fact of his presence from Phaon's slaves. His three companions therefore urged him, time after time, to save himself by suicide from the nameless contumelies which awaited him. Even Sporus entreated him again and again to show himself a man. It was in vain! In that coward and perverted nature every spark of manliness was quenched. 'It is not time yet,' he said. 'The destined hour has not arrived. How cruel you are to me!'

'Cruel?' said Epaphroditus, indignantly; 'do not we — alone of all your thousands of slaves — risk our lives for your sake? Since you must die, were it not better to die like an Emperor than like a whipped hound?'

'Well, then,' whimpered Nero, 'can't you at least dig me a grave, one of you? See, I will lie down to show you the right length.'

They began to dig the grave, and he whined out, 'Oh, what an artist to perish! What an artist to perish!'

'The grave is ready,' said Phaon.

'But can't you find some bits of marble to adorn it? Surely there must be some lying about.'

They saw through his pusillanimous delays, but managed to pick up a few fragments of common marble, while he still kept whimpering, 'Only to think that such an artist as I am must perish!'

'That is all the marble we can find,' said Phaon.

'Well, but you will have to burn my body,' he said. 'You must get some water to wash me, and some wood for the pyre.'

'Nero, Nero,' said Sporus to him again, 'will you not die like a man?'

In the midst of these idle pretexts a runner came with a letter for Phaon. Nero snatched it out of his hand and read 'that the Senate had pronounced him a public enemy, and decreed that he should be punished after the fashion of our ancestors.'

'What punishment is that?' he asked.

Is it possible that he did not know? He, who had so often heard it passed on others? he who, as men believed, had secretly wished that it should be inflicted on Antistius for libelling him? he who had suffered it to be pronounced against L. Vetus and the innocent Pollutia? Nevertheless Epaphroditus told him that it meant stripping him naked, thrusting his head into the opening of a forked gibbet, and then beating him to death with rods. Nero turned deadly pale. The thought of such agony and such outrage overwhelmed him. He plucked from their sheaths two daggers which he had brought with him, tried the edge of them, and then once more thrust them back with the threadbare tragic phrase, that 'the destined hour had not yet come.' Again the unhappy Sporus entreated him to remember that he was a man, a Roman, an Emperor.

'There is time, boy,' he said. 'Sing my funeral song; raise a lamentation for me.' And all the while he wept, and whimpered, 'Such an artist! Such an artist to perish!'

Phaon and Epaphroditus rebuked his abject timidity.

'Oh!' he cried, 'I cannot die. "Wife, father, mother, join to bid me die," but I dare not. Will not one of you kill himself and show me how to die?'

They were amazed at such depths of abject selfishness, and, reading his condemnation in their faces, he groaned out, 'Nero, Nero, this is infamy; come, rouse thyself; be a man!'

But how could the soul of this vicious, babyish, self-indulgent, overgrown, corrupted boy — this soul steeped through and through its every fibre with selfishness, vanity, and crime — how could it be thrilled with one virile impulse? The man within him was dead — only the cowardly animal survived.

The sound of horses' hoofs was heard galloping along the rough road leading to the villa. It denoted the approach of horsemen who had been bidden at all hazards to seize him alive. Strange that even at such a moment he could not help being self-conscious and melodramatic.

'"Thunder of swift-foot coursers smites my ears."'[1]

he said, trembling — quoting a verse of Homer. But at last, when not one second was to be lost, he placed the dagger

[1] Ἵππων μ' ὠκυπόδων ἀφὶ κτύπος οὔατα βάλλει.

against his throat, and, seeing that he would be too much of a poltroon to inflict anything more than an ineffectual wound, Epaphroditus with one thrust drove it home.

Then in burst the centurion. Anxious to seize him alive, he cried, 'Stay, stay, Nero! I have come to help you!' and tried with his cloak to stanch the bleeding wound.

'Too late,' gasped the dying wretch. — 'Is this your fidelity?'

With these words he died, and the spectators were horror-stricken at the wild, staring look of his rigid eyes, which seemed to stand out of his head.

Fidelity! What fidelity had Nero himself shown to God to human nature, to Rome, to his mother, his adoptive father, his wives, his brother, his tutors, his family, his friends, his slaves, his freedmen, his people, his own self? What more worthless life was ever disgraced by a more contemptible and abject death?

Forty-one princes and princesses of his race had perished since the beginning of the century, by the sword, by famine, or by poison; and the historian imagines the shades of those unhappy ones gathered round the miserable pallet on which — more miserably, more pusillanimously, more guiltily, more abjectly than any one of them — perished the last of a race whom heaven had been supposed to receive as gods, and whom earth rejected with disgust. And had their race ended in this manikin, in this cowardly and corrupted actor? 'The first of the Cæsars,' says the historian, 'had married four times; the second thrice; the third twice; the fourth thrice again; the fifth six times; and lastly this sixth Cæsar thrice: — of these repeated unions a large number had borne offspring.' Where were they all? Cut off for the most part by open murder, or secret suicide, or diseases mysterious and premature! And now the prophecy of the sibyl had been fulfilled —

'Last of the Æneadæ shall reign — a matricide!'

How many of his fancied enemies, how many of the innocent, had he caused to be decapitated! How often had he allowed their heads to be the mockery of their enemies! How had he himself insulted the ghastly relics of Sulla and of Rubellius Plautus; and suffered his mother and his wife

to insult the murdered remains of Lollia Paulina, and of the sad and innocent Octavia! His one dread was that his head should be similarly insulted; his one main entreaty to the companions of his flight had been that he should be burnt whole, and his head not be given to his enemies.

Fairer and kinder measure was dealt to him than he had dealt to others. Among those who hurried to the villa was Icelus, the powerful freedman of his rival Galba. Nero had thrown him into prison at the news of Galba's revolt, but at Nero's flight he had been set free. It was not the usual way with the Romans to make war with the dead, and Icelus gave permission that the body should be burnt. It was consumed in the white robe broidered with gold which he had worn at his ill-omened sacrifice on the first of January.

No hindrance was put in the way of his funeral. Two women who had nursed his infancy, and Acte, who had loved him in his youth, wept over his bier. No tear was shed besides. They laid his ashes in a porphyry sarcophagus, over which was raised an altar of the white marble of Luna, surrounded by a Thasian balustrade.

He was but thirty-one when he died; and he had crowded all that colossal criminality, all that mean rascality, all that insane degradation, extravagance, and lust, into a reign of fourteen years!

So great was the exultation over his fall of the people whom he had pampered, that the whole body of plebeians appeared in the streets wearing hats. A slave could only wear a hat after he had been manumitted, and the people wished to show that by his death they had been emancipated from slavery. Yet he and they had mutually corrupted each other, and the vicious populace had reacted on the vicious ruler. Nor was it long before those to whom vice was dear began to show their sympathy by adorning his tomb with spring and summer flowers. Every base and foul ruler who succeeded him — lascivious Otho, gluttonous Vitellius, savage Domitian, womanish Elagabalus, brutal Commodus — all who disgraced the name of Roman and of man — made him their ideal and their hero.

And since so very few had witnessed his death, the multitude in every land persisted in the belief that another body and not his had been burnt; that he had taken refuge among

the Parthians; that he would return to take vengeance on his enemies. The fancy gilded the brief fortune and precipitated the miserable punishment of at least two impostors. Of these Perkin Warbecks and Lambert Simnels of antiquity, one was put to death in the reign of Otho, the other in the reign of Domitian; and for nearly three centuries the legend lingered on in the Christian Church that Nero was the wild beast, wounded to death, but whose deadly wound had been healed — the Antichrist who should return again.

And the people fancied that his restless, miserable ghost haunted for centuries the *Collis Hortulorum*, the Monte Pincio, where stood the monument of the Domitii; until in pity for their terrors it was exorcised in 1099 by Pope Pascal II., the superb successor of the humble Linus. The Church of Santa Maria del Popolo stands to this day as a witness of the changed fortunes of that Church which Nero well-nigh extinguished and exterminated when he made light more ghastly than the darkness by kindling those living torches in the gardens of the Mons Vaticanus. Over that desecrated spot, as I have said, now falls the shadow of the vast Christian basilica, and the obelisk of Heliopolis, which towered over Nero as he drove his chariot through lines of burning men, testifies by its triumphant inscriptions to the victory of the faith of Christ.

CHAPTER LXVI

L'ENVOI

'Many kings have sat down upon the ground, and one that was never thought of hath worn the crown.' — Ecclus. xi. 5.

'All is best, though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.'

Samson Agonistes.

But little remains to be said; for, unless the writer has entirely failed of his purpose, the history of the preceding pages has told, and the fiction has illustrated, the truths which it was his object to set forth. We have seen something of what Paganism had become in the days of the Empire, and of what Christianity was in its life, and motives, and purposes. The contrast between the two gives us the secret why Christianity was destined to grow from that tiny grain of mustard-seed to a great tree, under whose shadow the nations of the world should rest.

But the reader may perhaps care to learn what was the future of those who played their little hour on the stage of life and have appeared in these pages. It is characteristic of that age of trouble and rebuke and blasphemy, in which the sun and the moon were darkened and the stars of heaven shaken, that many of the great and mighty and rich hardly looked for any other death than the steep declivities of murder and suicide. Heathendom had grown to a monster which, like the decrepit Saturn, devoured its own offspring. Those whom we ushered into the reader's presence at the beginning of this book had nearly all been swept away by violent deaths before the period at which it closes. We have seen the murders of Claudius, of Agrippina, of Britannicus, of Octavia, in that Palace thronged with the ghosts of crime. We have stood by the dreary deathbed of the honest

and manly Burrus, and by Corbulo when he fell on his own sword, and by Poppæa when she passed away in agony, her husband's victim. We have seen the shameful end of Lucan and of Mela; the terrible disillusionment and suicides of Gallio and of Seneca. We know how Pætus Thrasea died, and how the great nobles — the Silani, and Sulla, and Rubellius Plautus, and Antistius Vetus, and Ostorius Scapula, and Piso, and that host of conspirators — met their doom. Vice, and the favour of the Emperor, proved no protection to such gay courtiers as Tullius Senecio and Cæcina Tuscus; nor genius and refined Epicureanism to Petronius Arbiter; nor beauty and talent to poor handsome Paris. The vicious as well as the virtuous were often mingled in indiscriminate ruin. Of the guests whom we saw assembled at the Villa Castor, and to whose conversation we have listened as they gathered round the citron tables of Nero and Otho, the majority met with a miserable doom. With the exception of the family of Seneca, the literary men escaped fairly well. Persius died young, and by a natural death. The elder Pliny, who was a successor of Anicetus in the office of Admiral at Misenum, perished of the scientific curiosity which led him to watch too closely from the Liburnian galleys of his fleet the great eruption of Vesuvius, which destroyed Herculaneum and Pompeii in A.D. 79. Martial grew up to disgrace himself by shameful epigrams, to practise the arts of a fawning parasite to 'his lord and his god,' the vile Domitian, and at last to marry a rich wife, and retire to Spain with the memories of talents wasted, for the most part, over things vain and vile.

The philosophers were scattered and banished. Musonius Rufus, whom Demetrius the Cynic saw at work as a common labourer on the Isthmus of Corinth, was recalled by Galba, and honoured by Vespasian. He had the satisfaction of bringing to justice the infamous Publius Egnatius Celer, who had caused the murder of Barea Soranus and his daughter. Cornutus, who carried to the grave his sorrow for his bright young pupil, Persius, was banished in the last year of Nero's reign, and we hear of him no more. Demetrius the Cynic was banished by Vespasian. The Emperor passed him after his condemnation, and Demetrius, deigning neither to rise nor salute him, broke into open abuse; but Vespasian was

not cruel, and took no further revenge than to utter the one word 'Dog!'

The freedmen, too, were swept away one after another, Narcissus was poisoned by the order of Agrippina; Pallas and Doryphorus by the order of Nero. Epaphroditus was put to death by Domitian for having helped Nero to drive into his own throat the fatal dagger-thrust. Sporus — miserable victim of an evil age — had urged Nero to show one touch of manliness, and dare to die. Not long afterwards he, too, died by his own hands, rather than submit to that degradation of appearing on the stage which Nero had so often done and so eagerly desired to do. Helius, Polycletus, Patrobius, and others, were condemned and put to death by Galba, after having been led through the streets in chains. Spicillus, the favourite gladiator of Nero, was tied to one of his statues and crushed to death by it; Locusta died a death of infamy amid intense and universal rejoicing.

The informers met, for the most part, the fate that they deserved. Under previous emperors they had been — it is the comparison used by Seneca — like dogs whom their patrons fed with human flesh.[1] They cut men's throats with a whisper. A joke, a sarcasm, the babble of a drunkard, the confidential remark of private intercourse, the most casual and unpremeditated reflection — nay, even a careless gesture before the dumb image of the Emperor — might become, in their hands, an engine of destruction. They could earn one-fourth of the spoils by accusing a man either for something which he did, or for something which he did not do. Upon this evil gang of scoundrels, the worst curse of that day, Titus laid his heavy hand. He ordered the vilest of them to be beaten with rods in the Forum, to be dragged round the Amphitheatre, to be sold as slaves, to be deported to the rockiest and most desolate islands.

Epictetus, who had been sold as an infant from his cradle in Hierapolis, and whom we have heard talking to Titus and Britannicus in the days when he was the little slave of Epaphroditus, lived to bequeath to the world the legacy of thoughts purer and sweeter than any which we have received from classical antiquity, with the exception of those uttered by

[1] 'Acerrimi canes, quos ille, ut sibi uni mansuetos . . . sanguine humano pascebat.' — Sen. *Consol. ad Marc.* xxii. 3; comp. *De Benef.* iii. 26.

Marcus Aurelius, that 'bright consummate flower' of pagan morality. Those thoughts seem to absorb and to reflect the auroral glow of Christanity, and could never have been attained by a Pagan if Christianity had not been in the air. Epictetus was so poor that his sole possession was a small lamp — and even that was stolen from him! His virtue and political insignificance, his plain living and high thinking, did not save him from banishment. He retired to Nicopolis (where the Apostle Paul had spent his last winter), and there

> 'taught Arrian, when Vespasian's brutal son
> Cleared Rome of what most shamed him.'

And when he ended his peaceful life of obscurity and self-denial in extreme old age, he deserved the epitaph, 'I, Epictetus, was a slave, and lame, and a pauper, and dear to the Immortals.'

And did vengeance suffer such wretches as Nymphidius Sabinus and TIGELLINUS to escape? After crimes so many and so heinous, did they come to a good end? The traitor Nymphidius, after a futile and impudent attempt to secure the Empire for himself, was murdered by his own Prætorians. He dragged down with him to destruction the fierce Cingonius Varro, who had written an oration which Nymphidius was to pronounce to the soldiers. Tigellinus, indeed, was strangely protected by Nero's old and miserly successor when the clamour of the people demanded his life as an expiation for his crimes. He escaped by giving enormous bribes to Titus Vinius, Galba's legate, and priceless gems to his daughter Crispina. But to him also as to all, 'punishment was but another name for guilt, taken a little lower down the stream,' and vengeance in due time fell upon him, and suffered him not to live. After a vain attempt to bribe his executioners, he committed suicide at Sinuessa amid a coarse and brutal orgy, which reads like a parody upon the death of Petronius Arbiter. It was a death exceptionally squalid, vile, and agonising — fit end for a traitor, a coward, a villain of the deepest dye.

As for the succeeding Emperors, the spasm of their brief elevation was marked by universal horrors — wars, and rumours of wars, and massacres, and civil conflicts; nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, plagues and

famines and earthquakes in divers places. There was, as Christ had warned His disciples, great tribulation, such as had not been since the beginning of the earth, no nor shall be. These things were the beginning of troubles. The epoch is so described on the sacred page, and the best comment on those Christian prophecies is furnished by the dreary summary of the greatest of pagan historians.

And amid all these calamities and this unbelief, as the lightning cometh from the east and shineth even to the west, the sign was seen in heaven of the Son of Man coming in power and great glory. Against the old dispensation and the old world the doom visibly went forth. The abomination of desolation — the desolating wing of Rome's abominable eagle — was seen in the Holy Place. The marble floors of the Temple of Jerusalem swam in blood. Zealots laid their gory and brutal hands on the holiest things. Priests, gaunt with famine, were seen leaping madly into the flames kindled upon the altars. The gold which overlaid the cedarwork ran molten through the hissing stream of the carnage of its defenders, and the Holiest Place sank into heaps of ghastly ruin to have its site defiled with swinish offerings and pagan shrines. The Temple was doomed to annihilation, because it was the centre and type of an inferior and abrogated worship. And the same year which saw this visible abrogation of Judaism and all its pompous ineffectuality of ceremonies and sacrifices, saw also the great temple of the Capitoline Jupiter reduced to ashes in the fierce faction-fight between Sabinus, the elder brother of Vespasian, and the partisans of Vitellius. Thus, within a few months, the chief shrines of the Jew and the Pagan were polluted with massacre, and flung high into the air their flaming signals of the new faith which was to dominate the world. Their destruction was a beacon-light of the coming fulfilment of the old and awful prophecy, 'I will overturn, overturn, overturn, saith the Lord, till He come whose right it is.'

The three shadowy Emperors who followed Nero passed away within a few months, like phantoms, in defeat and shame. Galba — old, prosaic, unattractive, niggardly, with his feet so gouty that he could not wear a shoe, and his hands so gouty that he could not hold up a book — had disgusted Rome before six months were over, and was butchered in the streets. His

body was left lying where it fell till a common soldier, returning from harvesting, flung down his corn, cut off Galba's head, and, since there was no hair to hold it by, first hid it in his bosom, and then brought it to Otho with horrible indignities. OTHO, hurried to imperial dignity by his freedman and a score of soldiers, was Emperor for ninety-five days, and then was totally defeated by the German legions of Vitellius at the bloody battle of Bedriacum. It happened that one of the legionaries had brought evil tidings, and, being treated partly as a liar and partly as a coward who had fled from batttle, drew his sword, and, stabbing himself, fell dead at Otho's feet. Otho shuddered and recoiled at the sight. 'Men so brave, men so well-deserving,' he exclaimed, 'shall not be further imperilled on my account.' He might still have held out; he might still have been victorious; but at the age of thirty-seven he had seen enough of life. He had drained to the dregs the cup of its unsatisfying pleasures; he had discounted its hopes and fears. He wrote some kindly letters; divided among his servants what he had at hand; pardoned some deserters; saw any one who wished to see him; and then, hiding a dagger under his pillow, closed the doors and fell fast asleep. He awoke at dawn, and with one blow drove the dagger into his heart. He felt his own total unfitness for Empire. *Τί γάρ μοι καὶ μακροῖς αὐλοῖς*; '*What have I to do with long flutes?*' he was often heard to murmur to himself. Voluptuous, unheroic, this 'sweet and impudent creature' had, at one time, been more at home in the rites of the Bona Dea than among the banners of the legions. He was half inclined to fancy that he was one of those who are raised to power by a jest of fortune; — but he had been sobered a little by responsibility, and there was a touch of grace in the courage of his end.

His successor, VITELLIUS, the yet more infamous son of an infamous father, after a reign of seven months, chiefly noticeable for its drunkenness and voracity, was murdered in the streets with every expression of contumely. His body, pierced with multitudes of slight wounds, was first flung down the Gemonian steps, and then dragged through the streets by a hook, and flung into the Tiber.

The good plebeian, VESPASIAN, inaugurated a respite of simpler manners and better days, in which Rome and its so-

ciety returned to decency and good sense. A man of robust commonplace and kindly instincts, he won the Romans by his honesty and rough wit. When the Consular Menstrius Florus corrected his pronunciation (as Kemble did that of George III.) and told him that he ought not to say *plostra* (wagons) but *plaustra*, he only resented the impertinence when he met him the next day by addressing him, not as *Florus*, but as *Flaurus* (φλαῦρος), or 'not worth much.' When a youth came, reeking with perfume, to thank him for an appointment to the Prætorship, Vespasian, with a frown of disgust, said, 'I would have preferred that you smelt of garlic,' and cancelled the dandy's office. Tolerant and fearless, he resented no injuries, and ruled for ten years without making an enemy. Too sensible, and with a conscience too much at ease, for superstitious fears, when a comet was pointed out to him as portentous, he said — alluding to the Roman expression 'a hairy star' — that, 'it could not refer to a bald person like himself, but to the King of the Parthians, who had long hair!' When he felt the first touch of mortal illness, he observed, with a jest at the folly of senatorial *apotheosis*, 'I think I am becoming a god.' He was charged, indeed, with avarice, and the story was told that, when informed of a colossal statue which was to be reared to him at the public expense, he held out the hollow of his hand as though for the money, and said, 'The pedestal is ready.' But, if he was parsimonious, it was for the public good, and he returned from the proconsulate of Africa so poor that he had to mortgage all his possessions to his brother Sabinus. A thorough man of business, he was indifferent to parade and pomp. Napoleon I. was probably but half sincere when, on his return from the magnificences of his coronation, he flung his gorgeous robes into the corner, and said that 'he had never spent so tedious a day in his life;' but Vespasian was quite in earnest when, on the day of his great Judæan triumph, he found the processsion so tardy and tedious that he called himself 'an old fool who had been deservedly punished for his silly vanity.'

And what shall we say of TITUS, who has played a considerable part in our earlier pages? A Marcus Aurelius he was not; nor did he knock at the door of truth so earnestly or sit at the feet of virtue so humbly as did that saintly heathen. Yet there was an infinite charm about him. He was a man of

fine presence, of dignified yet winning demeanour, endowed with great personal strength and tenacious memory, eloquent, poetic, accomplished, a splendid rider, a fine swordsman, a patient and skilful general, a soldier of unflinching personal bravery. Josephus is constantly telling us of his firmness, his pity, his stern discipline, his splendid bravery. Again and again he exposed his person as freely as the commonest soldier in his ranks. Again and again he extricated himself from personal peril, and his legions from imminent defeat, with a strength which was unequalled, and a prowess which was contagious. At the siege of Jerusalem he constantly rode near the walls, and on one occasion shot down twelve of its defenders with twelve consecutive arrows. Amid all his heroic labours and anxious responsibilities he lost none of the fascination of his youth. When he left the Province to visit his father, the soldiers, who had already saluted him Emperor, demanded with supplications, and almost with threats, that he would either stay or take them with him. Unjustly suspected of a disloyal intention to found for himself an Eastern kingdom, he hurried to Rhegium, and thence to Puteoli with the utmost possible speed; and when he reached Rome, bursting into his father's presence, as though to confute the calumny, he embraced him with the touching cry, '*I have come, my father, I have come!*' He did not escape the sins and temptations of his youth, and his passionate love for Berenice, which she as passionately returned, involved him in discredit. But while he was still the support of his father's throne, he gave proofs of his faithfulness and self-control, and if he had been guilty of the faults which scandal charges upon him, the change which came over him when he was summoned to the purple was greater than the traditional change of our own hero-king, Henry V. As an Emperor, no vice was visible in him, but many supreme virtues. Deeply as he was attached to Berenice, he dismissed her from the city because Rome condemned an amour which would have been held venial and almost innocent in a Nero or a Domitian. He became chaste and self-controlled, full of munificence, entirely free from avarice. Gracious and generous to all, he acted on the rule '*that no one should leave the Emperor's presence with a gloomy brow.*' His famous saying, '*Friends, I have lost a day,*' was spoken when, at supper-time, he was unable to recall a favour conferred on

any one since morning. He courted the goodwill of the people, but without base concessions. Desirous as Pontifex Maximus to keep his hands unstained by the blood of the innocent, he declared 'that he would rather perish than destroy.' Nothing was more touching than the forgiving lenity with which he tolerated the plots and hatred of his execrable brother, Domitian. Aware of his wicked designs, he only took him aside secretly, and begged him with tears to act as a brother should. A deep misgiving oppressed his soul. At the end of the games which he had displayed to the people, he wept abundantly, and, oppressed by evil omens, started for his Sabine farm, full of grief. Stricken down with fever before he reached his home, he drew back the curtains of his litter, and looking heavenwards, he murmured, 'I do not deserve that my life should be thus cut short, nor have I done any deed to be repented of, except one.' What that one sin was he did not reveal, and no one could conjecture. He died in the same homely villa as his father, and, though he had only reigned two years and three months, in that brief time he had earned an affection which expressed itself in a genuine outburst of eulogy and regret, and which won for him the title of 'the darling of the human race.' But how vain a thing is glory! On the Arch of Titus the hero is represented being borne heavenward by an eagle with outspread wings. Vain triumphs! Vain and profane apotheosis! Little did it avail him to have won the passionate affection of his subjects! There is something infinitely sad in his shortened days and his brief tenure of power. It is only too probable that he fell a victim to the machinations of his brother, and died by poison secretly administered. And Destiny — let us say rather the will of God, of which he was the instrument — forced him, against his own wish, to be the exterminator of the city and — had extermination been possible — of the nationality of the chosen people. To them the darling of the human race is Titus *ha-Rashang*, 'Titus the Wicked.' They fable how, when he boasted that he had escaped vengeance, after escaping from a storm at sea, God sent a tiny gnat, which crept up his nostril into his brain. On his brain it fed, and caused him, day and night excruciating agonies. Finding once that it ceased to gnaw for an instant on hearing the banging of an anvil, he had an anvil constantly banged with a huge hammer at his side. But the

creature soon became accustomed to the sound! When Titus died, it was taken out of his brain, and found to be of the size of a bird, and to be furnished with a beak and claws of iron. Such is the torment which hatred devised for the best of the Twelve Cæsars, and the best but one or two of all the Emperors for three hundred years. But the sad truth is that, apart from such frenetic imaginations, the last years of the life of Titus were full of anxiety and disquietude, for which he did not find in a sounding philosophy the alleviation which he would have found abundantly in a humble faith.

With DOMITIAN we have happily been less concerned. How such a mixture of depravity and savageness, of falsity and ingratitude can have sprung from the virtuous union which also produced a Titus, is a mystery of atavism. But at last the dagger of Stephanus struck him down, and a better phase of the Empire was renewed. Rome gauged his character right when she nicknamed him 'the bald Nero.'

Of the Jews whom we have introduced, ISHMAEL BEN PHABI vanishes into obscurity. He lives, however, in the energetic curse which the Talmud pronounces upon family after family of the priests of that epoch. He occurs in the line which denounces the violence of himself and his sons: 'Woe to the family of Ishmael Ben Phabi! woe to their fists! . . . Their servants strike the people with their rods!'

JOSEPHUS became the devoted creature of the Flavian dynasty. By timely prophecies he managed to secure the favour of Vespasian and Titus, as he had won their admiration by his genius and courage. He played his difficult part with consummate astuteness, and secured his safety in spite of the execration of the Jews and the suspicion of the Romans. But what shall we say of a man who, in spite of his boasted patriotism, could, after being an eyewitness of the long, slow agony of his country's dissolution, be a guest of the Romans during the games in which hundreds of his miserable fellow-countrymen perished in the amphitheatre? — of a man who could commemorate without a pang the unequalled splendour of the triumph at Rome, when Vespasian and Titus, robed in purple and silk and crowned with laurel, sat in their chariots amid rivers of splendid spoils, and Domitian rode a gallant war-horse by their side, and Simon Bar-Gioras, after cruel insults, was led aside at the foot of the Capitol to be

strangled in the Tullian Vault? Judæa Captiva wept under her palm-tree, desolate, broken-hearted, with her hair about her ears, and the famous Arch of Triumph was built which still shows the golden candlestick, and table of shewbread, and vessels of incense — beneath which it is said that no Jew will walk, because even in a strange land they remember thee, O Zion! But the sleek priest and warrior who had been selected as one of the defenders of his country, accepted an assignment of land from devastated territories of his native country; inhabited a suite of rooms in Vespasian's own house; and continued to live in the sunlight of court favour, not only under Titus, but also under Domitian. And then, not by martyrdom, not as a patriot, but as the pensioned favourite of those who had massacred his countrymen and destroyed the tombs and city of his fathers, he died, and went to his own place, leaving behind him, even in the light of his own falsified records, an ignoble and dishonoured name.

King Agrippa II., after a considerable portion of his domains had been reduced to a desert, lived also in Rome, as a titular king, and died, at the age of seventy, in the reign of Trajan — the last prince of the House of Herod. Happy had it been for him if St. Paul had, not almost, but altogether persuaded him to be a Christian. He languished on, wealthy and despised, with Josephus as his bosom friend. It might have been said of him, in the language of the Prophet: 'All the kings of the nations, all of them, sleep in glory, every one in his own house. But thou art cast away from thy sepulchre, like an abominable branch. . . . Thou shalt not be joined with them in burial, because thou hast destroyed thy land, thou hast slain thy people.'

Berenice, the widow of two kings, was no longer young when she won Vespasian by her splendid presents, and Titus by her Eastern beauty and fascination. But he listened to the voice of duty when he dismissed her from Rome, and when she returned he avoided seeing her. She, too, vanished into the darkness, and died we know not when.

Aliturus, no longer the apostate Jew, but the humble Christian, found it, of course, impossible to play any longer the part of the favourite pantomime of the Roman stage. He loathed the thought of ever again wearing his motley before the grinning and degraded populace. He would fain

have aided the struggling Church of Rome, but there was nothing that he could do; and the presence of one whose person was so well known would only imperil the gatherings of that handful of slaves and artisans in the catacombs. The Christians themselves advised him to leave the city, which he could not dissociate from his dead past. He sold his house in Rome, and his villa in the suburbs, and, leaving a large sum in the hands of Cletus to help his flock, he sailed for Palestine, receiving before he started the blessing of Paul the prisoner, and carrying with him letters of commendation from the Beloved Disciple to Simeon and others of the Desposyni, or 'relations of the Lord.' These letters neither revealed his real name, which he had changed to Amandus, nor his past history, which might have created an invincible prejudice; but certified that he had been converted to the faith, and was now a brother, faithful and beloved. He freely gave of his wealth to the destitute, and was of great service to a church pre-eminently poor.

And, remaining in Jerusalem, he was an eye-witness of all that horrid siege, in which a nation overwhelmed with unutterable calamities, intensified by their own unutterable guilt, sighed in vain to see one of the days of the Son of Man. Joining the moderate party, he did his little best to counteract the overweening tyranny of John of Giscala. He witnessed the slaughter committed by the Idumeans, when they had been invited into the city. He saw the insults heaped on the corpse of the murdered High Priest Hanan; and the martyrdom of Zechariah, the son of Baruch, in the middle of the Temple; and the High Priest Matthias murdered by Simon Bar-Gioras, after his three sons had been slain before his eyes. He heard the roar of internecine conflict, when three sections of fanatics fought furiously against each other. Day by day he was agonised by the inconceivable miseries of the starving and maddened people. He saw the granaries madly burnt in civil discords; the marble floor of the sanctuary wet with footsteps dipped in blood; the gore of worshippers slain by the hurtling engines of zealots, mingling with the blood of the sacrifices; the deserters sent back with their hands cut off, or ripped open to search for the gold which they had swallowed, or crucified outside the city-walls, till wood failed for the crosses, and crosses for the bodies;

the streets and houses full only of the corpses of those whom famine had slain; the horrible disorders of rampant licentiousness, which were the expression of blasphemous despair. He saw Martha, the daughter of the wealthy Gamaliel, trying to pick grains for food from the ordure of the streets; he saw the miserable mother who, in the pangs of hunger, roasted and devoured her own child. He heard the incessant thunder of the battering-rams upon the walls, and the whizz of the dazzling stones hurled from the catapults, and the monotonous cry of the poor scourged maniac wandering about day and night with the wail: '*A voice from the East, a voice from the West, a voice from the four winds! Woe, woe to Jerusalem, and to the people, and to the Holy House!*' He heard Josephus and Titus pleading with the frantic people, and the false prophets deluding them. He heard the crash of the falling cloister which buried six thousand men, women, and children under its ruins, and the roaring of the flames, and the groans of the wounded, and the shout of the victors, and the despairing yell of the defeated. He saw the priests tearing the gilded spikes from the Temple roof, and hurling them down upon the Romans. In spite of the strong efforts of Titus — under the urgent entreaties of Agrippa and Josephus — to spare the Temple, he saw a Roman soldier, as though inspired by some divine fury, snatch up a burning brand, and spring upon the back of a comrade, and hurl his torch through the golden window of one of the chambers which surrounded the Holiest Place; and then, when the flames burst out on every side, he saw the whole Temple hill assume the aspect of a great bellowing volcano stored with fire, while amid the upheaped corpses the blood, streaming in rivers from fresh wounds, hissed and bubbled as though it would almost have quenched the flames. He saw something of that awfully desperate struggle of madness and fury,

> 'When through the cedarn courts, and gates of gold,
> The trampled ranks in miry carnage rolled.
> To save their Temple every hand essayed,
> And with cold fingers clutched the feeble blade;
> Through their torn veins reviving fury ran,
> And life's last anger warmed the dying man.'

And how his life was preserved — famine-stricken, wounded, horrified, daily imperilled as he was in that circle of fire in

which the scorpions of religious faction madly stung each other to death — he never knew. From April 10, A. D. 70, when Titus pitched his camp near Jerusalem, till July 17, when, for the first time, the perpetual sacrifice ceased, for lack of priests to offer it — and on till August 10, when the Holiest sank in flames, and the Roman soldiers adored their idolatrous ensigns in its blackened area — and onwards till September 8, when all resistance ended, Aliturus had scarcely known one day which was not full of terror and misery. In the final indiscriminate slaughter of the captured city he was selected as one of the seven hundred youths, conspicuous for size and beauty, who were destined to grace the triumph of Vespasian and Titus. But he sought an interview with Josephus and the astonished Titus, and when he revealed to them his indentity, and convinced them that his one desire had been to win the Jews to counsels of moderation, and to do good works among the miserable, he was set free, and large presents were given to him, and he was suffered to go whither he would.

He could not return to Jerusalem, for Jerusalem was no more, and on the Jews had fallen their own awful imprecation — 'His blood be on us and on our children!' He went to Pella, whither the Church of Jerusalem had, so to speak, fled into the wilderness. With the Christians there he abode for some time, and then he visited St. John at Ephesus, and Onesimus at Hierapolis. The memories of his own country had been too striking and oppressive, and the brilliant favourite of the Roman populace died at Hierapolis, a beloved but obscure presbyter of its happy church.

The persecutions of the Christians continued intermittently for three centuries, and the rhythmic cry — the double *antispastus*, *Chrīstĭānōs ād lĕōnēs* — rang through the amphitheatre of many a pagan city. But the church grew and flourished and shone in the world like that Vision of the Apocalypse — a woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, and a crown of twelve stars upon her head. The Church of Rome rose from her ashes, and in many a seven-times-heated flame of affliction there stood beside her One like unto the Son of Man.

When LINUS died, Cletus succeeded him as the third 'Pope' of Rome — although that title was not given to the humble

presbyter-bishops of the struggling community for more than two centuries, and not formally adopted by them till about A. D. 400. Cletus was succeeded by Clement. Of the first thirty Popes it is said by Christian tradition that all but two were martyrs. The blood of those martyrs was the seed of the Church. That Church had been consumed to ashes, and, rising from her ashes, soared heavenwards, first waveringly, then steadily, at last with supreme dominion, 'reflecting the sunlight from every glancing plume.'

HERMAS, having been made a freedman by Octavia, set up in trade, and married. But he was unfortunate. In one of the later persecutions under Domitian he was betrayed to the informers by his own sons. He escaped with his life; and in the reign of Nerva he, with other victims of the cruel Flavian Emperor, received lands in lieu of the goods of which he had been despoiled. He cultivated his little farm in peace, and lived to write the celebrated 'Shepherd,' which some have described as 'a fusionless screed of dry morality,' and some as a dull novel, but which may be called 'the "Pilgrim's Progress" of the Early Church.' Simple as it is, it was so well suited to the days in which it was written that it was read in the churches, and almost attained the dignity of Scripture.

PUDENS and CLAUDIA made their permanent home in Britain. They found it a more congenial residence for Christians than bloodstained Rome, and by the beauty of their lives, as well as by their teaching, they escaped the hostility of the Druids, and founded a Church in their house, and in the city of Noviomagus, where they chiefly lived. They acquired a deep affection for 'the isle of blossoming woodlands, isle of silvery parapets,' which they adopted as their own, in spite of the courteous invitation of Titus, who urged them to return to Rome. And sometimes Pudens thought that there must be a prescience in the British prophecy which their friend Laureatus, the Latin poet of Vectis, had turned into galliambics from the wild songs which fired the patriotism of the host of Boadicea, and which said —

'Though the Roman eagle shadow thee, though the gathering enemy harrow thee,
Thou shalt wax and he shall dwindle, thou shalt be the mighty one yet;

Thine the liberty, thine the glory, thine the deeds to be celebrated ;
Thine the myriad-rolling ocean, light and shadow illimitable,
Thine the lands of lasting summer, many-blossoming Paradises,
Thine the North, and thine the South, and thine the battle-thunder of God.'

The old king CARADOC lived with them for a time in the charming villa which they had built. He had fancied at first that, after the disgrace of defeat and betrayal, he would never be able to show his face among the warlike Silures whom he had led to victory. But Christianity softened his soul. He received a warm welcome from many of his friends and former subjects, and it was no little due to his conversion and his teaching that Christianity secured a footing among the Cymry long before its truths had been accepted in other portions of the British Isles.

POMPONIA crowned a life of love and gracious kindness with a death of perfect peace. She recovered from the virulent fever which she had caught in the prisons, and consoled the drooping years of her husband, Aulus Plautius. He died in the reign of Titus, and she did not long survive him. She was happily spared the spectacle of the reign of Domitian and the martyrdom of Flavius Clemens. All who were in sorrow sought her for consolation. Even the imperial Titus came gladly to her when his dark hour was upon him, and his heart was broken by the cruel ingratitude of his brother. She heard often from Pudens and Claudia, and from all whom she had loved. She fostered by every means in her power the struggling community of the catacombs, and when she lay upon her deathbed St. Clement, the fourth Bishop of Rome, administered to her the last sacrament. Her example had been of high benefit even to the Pagans of Roman society. It was her influence which told in the improved manners of the reign of Vespasian, and no vestal was more honoured for her official sanctity than Pomponia Græcina for her Christian holiness. When the ear heard her it blessed her, and when the eye saw her it gave witness to her. The blessings of those that were ready to perish came upon her, and she caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.

The close of the life of ONESIMUS was as peaceful as its youthful years had been full of trouble and storm. After the martyrdom of the Apostle Paul, and the all-but-extinction of

the Church in Rome, he proposed that Nereus, and Junia, who was now united to him in holy wedlock, should leave Aricia, and, with the means which they possessed, should establish a new home in his native Thyatira, or in Hierapolis, or in Ephesus. Nereus gladly consented, for the gloom and loneliness of Aricia weighed upon his spirits, and he was haunted by the thoughts of the agonies which he had witnessed in the imprisonment and death of his brethren at Rome. Before they started, Onesimus sought a secret interview with his cousin and foster-sister ACTE. He found her still living in the Golden House, but profoundly uncertain about the future. She had bathed the mangled corpse of Nero with her tears; she had adorned his grave with flowers; she had ventured even to pray for his soul. To her he was not the monster into which he developed, but still the youth who had loved her, and whom she had loved. But now, amid the terrible scenes which Rome was witnessing, and seemed likely long to witness in the fierce struggles of rival generals for power, her life was anxious. Apart from the obvious perils which might befall her in the hands of such wretches as Nymphidius and Tigellinus, she had long desired to escape from that city of Circean splendour. Eagerly she offered Onesimus to accompany him, and told him that now she, like himself, was a baptised Christian. She resumed her old name of Eunice, which she had borne as a child before the evil days of Rome, and she had wealth sufficient to maintain them all.

Her preparations were made secretly, with the aid of the Christian slaves in Cæsar's household. She sold her jewels, and, taking much of her property with her, sailed with Onesimus and his wife and Nereus to Ephesus. They fixed their home at Hierapolis, where they could enjoy the teaching of the Deacon Philip, and where Acte, gladly serving as a deaconess of the little Church, gave all her goods to the poor, and lived in happy friendship with the virgin daughters of the Evangelist. The children of Onesimus and Junia owed much to her kindly nurture and teaching. In due time Onesimus himself was ordained to the ministry, and became in later years a bishop of the Church of Ephesus. There, when he was quite an old man, in the year A. D. 107, he met the martyr Ignatius of Antioch, when he was being conducted to his martyrdom in the Colosseum by the decuria of soldiers

whom he calls 'his ten leopards.' He showed the greatest kindness to the holy martyr, who, in his letter to the Ephesians, gratefully commemorates the 'inexpressible love' which Onesimus had manifested towards him. Some say that he, too, suffered martyrdom at Ephesus, after a long life and many happy years.

And now that Judaism had been utterly crushed, Paganism again and again wrestled with Christianity, and put forth all its force. It strove to rival the new faith by ritual splendour and orgiastic rites, and 'the extreme sensuality of superstition. It strove to put forth Pythagoras, or Socrates, or Apollonius of Tyana as parallels to Christ; and Stoicism and Neo-Platonism as substitutes for the truths of the Gospel. It kindled its expiring lamps with 'sparks from the incorruptible fountain of wisdom,' and turned its back on the Sun of Righteousness, from which they were derived. It tried all that sneers and banter could do in the writings of the Pseudo-Lucian, and all the power and passion of argument in the books of Porphyry, Hierocles, and Celsus. Waging deadly war against all who called themselves Christians, it tried to burn them at its stakes, to crucify them on its countless gibbets, to devour them by its herds of wild beasts, at least to daunt them by its horrible tortures. On every field Christians met and conquered them with the two sacred and invincible weapons of martyrdom and innocence. The Church escaped from and soared out of their reach on 'the two great wings of pureness and kindness,' and so 'by the unresistible might of weakness shook the world.' The Christians refuted the arguments urged against them; they turned the edge of the jeers; they exposed the feebleness of the philosophers who wrote to denounce them. Meekly enduring the tortures devised against them 'they stood safe' (as said their martyr Cyprian); 'stronger than their conquerors, the beaten and lacerated members conquered the beating and lacerating hooks.' These obscure Sectaries — barbarians, Orientals, Jews, slaves, artisans — fought against the indignant world, and won. And when they had won, and in proportion as they won, they ennobled and purified the world. Wrestling with the pagan curse of corruption they made pure the homes, and the

conversation, and the amusements, and the literature, and the inmost hearts of all who faithfully accepted the truths they preached. Wrestling with the curse of cruelty they suppressed infanticide, they sanctified compassion, they put down the cruel and ghastly scenes of human slaughter in the amphitheatre, they made the wretched and the sick and the outcast their special care, 'they encircled the brow of sorrow with the aureole of sanctity.' Wrestling with the curses of slavery and selfish exclusiveness they taught the inalienable rights of humanity, they confronted tyranny, they inspired nations with the spirit of liberty, they flung over the oppressed a shield of adamant, they taught that all men are the children of God. Intellectually, socially, politically, in national life and in individual life, in art and in literature, Christianity has inspired all that the world has seen of best and noblest, and still offers to the soul of every man the purest hope, the divinest comfort, the loftiest aspirations. To talk of 'the crimes of Christianity' is a preposterous paradox. There is not one evil thought that can be thought, not one evil deed that can be done, which is not utterly alien from its true spirit. Crimes, indeed, without number have been committed in its name. Kings, and priests, and peoples have misinterpreted its documents, forged its commissions, falsified the image and superscription of its current coins, while 'swarms of vile creatures have made it an inexhaustible prey.' But 'it has lived through all, and has suffered that which would have been tenfold death to aught less than Divine.' And even yet, after nearly nineteen centuries have sped since its Dawn began, and its Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in His wings, this faith alone sets before mankind the Divine Example of a Perfect and a Sinless Man, and alone offers the sure promises of pardon and of peace. All the best wisdom of the world lies in the brief Book of its New Covenant, and all the hopes of the world lie centred in the faithful acceptance of its Law and of its Life.

NOTES

Note 1. Page 3.

The Palace of the Cæsars. — In this description of the Palace of the Cæsars, I chiefly follow Lanciani and Burn's *Rome and the Campagna*, ch. viii. See, too, Statius, *Sylv.* iv. 26–31; Claudian, *De VI. Cons. Hon.* 39–41.

Note 2. Page 10.

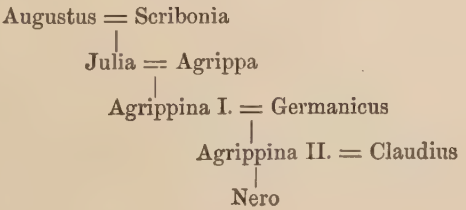
Lollia Paulina's jewels. — See Pliny, *N. H.* ix. 58.

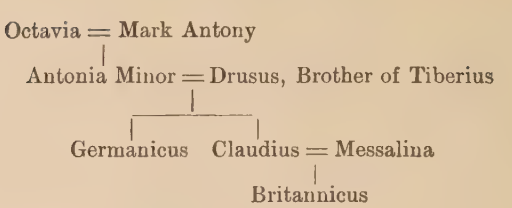
Note 3. Page 14.

Agrippina's talking thrush. — 'Agrippina, Claudii Principis, turdum habuit, quod nunquam ante, imitantem sermones humanos, cum hæc proderem. Habebant et Cæsares juvenes [*i. e.* Nero and Britannicus] sturnum, item luscinias, Græco et Latino sermone dociles, præterea . . . loquentes longiore etiam contextu.' — Pliny, *N. H.* x. 59.

Note 4. Page 14.

Nero's genealogy. — Nero was, in the female line, *abnepos* — great-great-grandson — of Augustus. Britannicus was only the *pronepos* — great-grandson — of Octavia (the sister of Augustus), and great-nephew of Tiberius: —





NOTE 5. PAGE 31.

Agrippina's white nightingale. — Pliny says it cost more than 40*l* *N. H.* x. 43.

NOTE 6. PAGE 43.

The Bacchanalians. — The orgies of this pseudo-religious body had been denounced and suppressed in B. C. 186. — See Livy, xxxix. 9–14.

NOTE 7. PAGE 44.

Nero's poetry. — The lines of Persius, *Sat.* i. 92–105, have been supposed to contain these quotations from Nero's poems.

NOTE 8. PAGE 51.

Seneca's flatteries. — The opening of Seneca's *De Clementia* abounds in this fulsome and impolitic flattery.

NOTE 9. PAGE 52.

For these self-criticisms of Seneca, See *Ep.* xlv. lxxx. &c.; *De Vit. Beat.* 3.

NOTE 10. PAGE 60.

Nero really made this jest. — Tac. *Ann.* xiv 14.

NOTE 11. PAGE 63.

Epictetus. — No date in the life of Epictetus is certain; but as he was certainly the slave of Epaphroditus, Nero's secretary, I take no violent liberty in introducing him here.

NOTE 12. PAGE 64.

Slaves were not held culpable for what their masters ordered. — The sentiment which Petronius puts into the mouth of Trimalchio — 'Nec turpe est quod dominus jubet' — is echoed by Seneca, 'Impudicitia . . . in servo necessitas est.'

Note 13. Page 67.

The ass-headed god. — One of the ancient calumnies against the Christians is that they worshipped a god with an ass's head named *Onokoites*. See the writer's *Lives of the Fathers*, i. § v. Hence the Christians were called *Asinarii*, and the ancients thought that Jews also worshipped the ass. See Tac. *Hist.* v. 4; Plut. *Sympos.* iv. 5, § 2; Diod. Sic. xxxiv. Fragm.; Jos. *C. Apion.* ii. 7. For the slander as regards Christians, See Min. Fel. *Octav.* ix. 28; Tert. *Ad Natt.* i. 14, *Apol.* 16. The celebrated *graffito* of 'Alexamenos adoring his god,' known by the Germans as the *Spott-Crucifix*, is now in the Library of the Collegio Romano at Rome, in the *Museo Kircheriano*. It was really found in the Gelotian *Pædagogium*, but is probably all later date than the reign of Nero.

Note 14. Page 68.

Duc me, Parens, celsique Dominator poli,
Quocumque placuit; nulla parendi mora est.
Adsum impiger. Fac nolle, comitabor tamen.

Cleanthes *apud* Senecam.

Note 15. Page 69.

Ancient wall-scribblings. — For the *Graffito* alluded to see note 13. The playful distich attributed to Britannicus is really scrawled on a wall at Pompeii: —

'Admiror, paries, te non cecidisse ruina
Qui tot stultorum tædia sustineas.'

The *graffiti* ascribed to Titus are on the walls of the *Domus Gelotiana*, but are becoming fast obliterated. They were discovered in 1857. — See Lanciani's *Rome*, p. 121.

Note 16. Page 74.

The 'Cyzicene room' of a luxurious Roman house or villa faced the north, and opened by folding doors on the garden. The younger Pliny had such rooms in his villa. They were built for warmth and sunlight.

Note 17. Page 75.

For a remarkable '*unconscious prophecy of heathendom*,' see Æsch. *Prom. Vinct.* 1026–1029. Seneca's words are: — 'Nemo per se satis valet ut emergat. Oportet manum aliquis porrigat, aliquis educat.' Sen. *Ep.* 52.

Note 18. Page 77.

The Fish. — The initial letters of ΙΧΘΥΣ, 'fish,' stood for Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτήρ, 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour.'

It was the commonest of ancient Christian symbols. See Tert. *De Bapt.* i.; Jer. *Ep.* 43; Aug. *De Civ. Dei,* xviii. 23; and the writer's *Lives of the Fathers,* i. § xvi.

NOTE 19. PAGE 81.

Arrest of Onesimus. — Some readers will recognise an incident which really occurred in the life of Alypius, the friend of St. Augustine, which the English reader may see narrated in my *Lives of the Fathers,* ii. 313.

NOTE 20. PAGE 101.

Agrippas. — Children born feet-first were called *agrippas,* and to be so born was regarded as a certain augury of misfortune. — Pliny, *N. H.* vii. 6.

NOTE 21. PAGE 114.

Ancient dancing. — The allusions to the dancing of the pantomimic actors may all be found in Lucan's *De Saltatione;* Vell. Paterc. ii. 83; Athen. xiv. 627–630; and other ancient writers.

NOTE 22. PAGE 124.

Lucan's daring flatteries may be read in *Pharsal.* i. 33–66.

NOTE 23. PAGE 137.

The Stemma Cæsarum. — For further facts and details about the Cæsarian family, See Champagny, *Les Césars,* ii. 77, and *passim.*

NOTE 24. PAGE 145.

Otho's banquet. — The details here described are derived in every particular from Pliny, Suetonius, Seneca, and other ancient writers.

NOTE 25. PAGE 152.

Tossing in a blanket. Sagatio. — Suet, *Otho,* 2; Mart. i. 4. A case is mentioned in Ulpian of a boy who was killed by it. Greek, παλμός.

NOTE 26. PAGE 157.

Age of Britannicus. — There is some historic uncertainty about the age of Britannicus. The proper date for assuming the *toga virilis* was the *end* of the fifteenth year, but Nero had been allowed to assume it soon after his fourteenth birthday (Tac. *Ann.* xii. 41). In *Ann.* xii. 25 Tacitus says that Nero was *two* years older (*biennio* majorem) than Britannicus; but from xiii. 6 and 15, where we are told that Nero was barely seventeen at the beginning of his reign, and that Britannicus was nearly fifteen when he was murdered, it seems clear that *triennio* would be nearer the truth than *biennio.* Eckhel, in his *Doctr. Num.* vi.

260, comes to the conclusion that Nero was *three years and two months* older than Britannicus; and other circumstances seem to make this probable. Suetonius also (*Claud.* 27) makes some admitted blunders. It seems likely that Nero was born on Dec. 15, A. D. 37, and Britannicus on Feb. 12 or 13, A. D. 41, on the twentieth day of his father's reign. On this subject I must refer to Nipperdey on Tac. *Ann.* xii. 25; Orelli on Tac. *Ann.* xii. 25, 41, xiii. 6, 15; H. Schiller, *Gesch. d. Römischen Kaiserreichs*, pp. 71, &c.

Note 27. Page 171.

Making gods. — Nero makes the remark in the text to Seneca in the tragedy of *Octavia*: —

> 'Stulte verebor, ipse quum faciam, Deos.'
>
> *Octav.* Act. ii. 450.

Note 28. Page 174.

Χρυσὸν ἀνὴρ εὑρὼν ἔλιπε βρόχον, αὐτὰρ ὁ χρυσὸν
Ὃν λίπεν οὐχ εὑρών, ἥψεν ὃν εὗρε βρόχον.

This epigram was once quoted to Coleridge as proof of the condensation possible in Greek. He at once rendered it in the two English lines: —

> 'Jack, finding some gold, left a rope on the ground,
> Tom, missing his gold, used the rope which he found.'

Note 29. Page 175.

Pagan epitaphs. — For those quoted see *Nov. Fiorentini*, xxxiii. (ap. Döllinger, *Judaism*, &c. ii. 147; and Muratori, p. 1677).

Note 30. Page 176.

The magnificent verses sung by Britannicus are preserved by Cicero (*Tusc. Disp.* iii. 19), and were deservedly admired for their force and rhythm. They end thus, with a striking specimen of ancient rhyme: —

> 'Hæc omnia vidi inflammari,
> Priamo vitam vi evitari,
> Jovis aram sanguine turpari.'

Note 31. Page 200.

This ancient hymn is preserved for us at the end of the *Pædagogus* of St. Clement of Alexandria. I avail myself of the translation by my friend the late Dean of Wells (*Lazarus, and other Poems*).

Note 32. Page 213.

An imperial banquet. — See Sen. *Ep.* xc. 15, cxv. 9. The *menu* of a banquet of luxurious Salian priests is preserved in Macrobius, *Saturn.* iii. 13.

Note 33. Page 273.

The classical reader will recognise that I have not invented these stories of rural pagan life. They are found in Apuleius.

Note 34. Page 318.

The Lemuralia. — See this expiatory rite described in Ovid, *Fasti*, v. 421–444; and compare Latour St.-Ybars, *Néron*, pp. 213, 214. The custom is also alluded to in Varro, *Vit. Pop. Rom.* Fr. 241; Servius *ad Æn.* i. 276.

Note 35. Page 323.

Gladiators' School. — 'Alebat devotum corpus pravior omni fauce sagina.' — Quinct. 'Qui dabit immundæ venalia fata saginæ.' — Propert. iv. 8. 25. Δεῖ σε εὐτακτεῖν, ἀναγκοφαγεῖν, ἀπέχεσθαι πεμμάτων, μὴ ψυχρὸν πίνειν. — Epict. *Dissert.* iii. 15, § 3.

Note 36. Page 325.

The gladiator's oath was comprehensively horrible. 'In verba Eumolpi sacramentum juravimus *uri*, *vinciri*, *verberari*, *ferroque necari*, et quicquid aliud Eumolpus jussisset; *tamquam legitimi gladiatores domino corpora animosque religiosissime addicimus.*' — Petronius.

Note 37. Page 330.

Gladiatorial games. — Not one incident is here described which does not find its authority in Martial *De Spectaculis*, and other epigrams, or in one or other of the many contemporary or later writers of the Empire. See Lipsius, *De Gladiatoribus* in his *Saturnalia*.

Note 38. Page 334.

Dead gladiators. — 'Quinetiam percussos jacentesque repeti jubent, et cadavera ictibus dissipari, ne quis illos simulata morte deludat' (Lactantius).

Note 39. Page 351.

The Rex Nemorensis. — See Ovid, *Fasti*, iii. 263–277; Propert. iii. 24. 9; Stat. *Sylv.* iii. 1. 32; and Mr. Fraser's *Golden Bough*.

The appearance and cautious terror of the priest are described by Strabo (v. 3. 12): — ξιφήρης οὖν ἐστιν, ἀεὶ περισκοπῶν, τὰς ἐπιθέσεις ἕτοιμος ἀμύνεσθαι.

Note 40. Page 398.

Age of Octavia. — Nothing certain can be ascertained as to the *exact* age of Octavia at her death. Tillemont, *Néron*, Art. xv., thinks that she was twenty-two; and Nipperdey on Tac. *Ann.* xiv. 64 conjectures that the true reading is 'II et vicesimo.' See Stahr, *Agrippina*, p. 54; Lehmann, 132; Sievers, *Studien zur Gesch. des Röm. Kaiser.* 129; H. Schiller, *Gesch. des Röm. Kaiserreichs*, 67. When she married Nero she was apparently thirteen, and he fifteen; Schiller, *l. c.* 83.

Note 41. Page 401.

Christian fortitude. — These are the explanations given by Pagans of the calmness of Christians under martyrdom. Marc. Aurelius says that men should die calmly, yet not *διὰ ψιλὴν παράταξιν ὡς οἱ Χριστιανοί*, *Medit.* xi. 3; *ὑπὸ μανίας, ὑπὸ ἔθους, ὡς οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι*, says Epictetus, *Dissert.* iv. 7.

Note 42. Page 416.

Ishmael ben Phabi. — An Ishmael ben Phabi was made high priest by Valerius Gratus; and another, or the same at a later age, by Festus. The younger is here intended.

Note 43. Page 434.

Anchialus is a dubious word found in Martial, *Ep.* xi. 94, and very variously explained. The famous oracle quoted by Josephus is found in Macrobius, *Saturn.* i. 18.

Note 44. Page 439.

Esther, in her epitaph, charges Arescusus not to put 'D. M.' or any other pagan symbol on her tomb. The name of Primitivus, a *Curator Spoliarii* in Nero's time (mentioned in the next paragraph), has been preserved in an inscription found in the Columbaria.

Note 45. Page 448.

I borrow this ancient hymn from the conclusion of the *Pædagogus* of Clement of Alexandria. The translation is by my friend the late Dean of Wells.

Note 46. Page 477.

What we call St. Elmo's fire was known to the ancients as 'the fires of Castor and Pollux. A *bidental* was an enclosure round a place struck by lightning. For such legends of St. John as I have here adopted I may refer to Tert. *De Præscr. Hær.* 36; Jer. *C. Jovin.* i. 26; and *In Matt.* xx. 23, Orig. *In Matt.* Hom. xii; Zahn, *Acta Johannis*, cxvii.–cxxii.

Note 47. Page 478.

I have elsewhere given strong reasons for the belief that St. John was banished to Patmos by Nero, *not* by Domitian. See *Early Days of Christianity*, ii. 147, 184 *sqq*.

Note 48. Page 485.

Icarus. — See Sueton, *Nero*, 12; Dio Chrysost. *Orat.* xxi. 9. There seems to be an echo of this incident in the legend about the attempted flight of Simon Magus. Cyril Hierosol. *Catech.* vi. 15; Arnob. *C. Gentes*, ii. 12. See Lipsius, *Petrus-Sage*, and Fabricius, *Cod. Apocr. N. T.* iii. 632.

Note 49. Page 485.

See Clem. Rom. *Ad Cor.* i. 6. *Διὰ ζῆλος διωχθεῖσαι γυναῖκες Δαναΐδες καὶ Δίρκαι αἰκίσματα δεινὰ καὶ ἀνόσια παθοῦσαι· ἐπὶ τὸν τῆς πίστεως βέβαιον δρόμον κατήντησαν καὶ ἔλαβον γέρας γενναῖον αἱ ἀσθενεῖς τῷ σώματι.* I do not see any reason to accept any alterations of the reading. See, too, Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 167. The Dirce-statue, known as the Farnese Bull, is now in the Museo Borbonico at Naples.

Note 50. Page 489.

I am indebted for one slight touch in this scene to the otherwise absurd sketch in Latour St.-Ybars' *Néron*.

Note 51. Page 540.

Dion Cassius tells the fate of Corbulo in three energetic words: *παίων ἔλεγεν Ἄξιος* (lxiii. 17).

Note 52. Page 556.

The reader who is familiar with the cycles of early Christian legend will recognise that I borrow the character of Patroclus and various incidents of these scenes from the *Acts of Linus*. They are printed in De la Bigne, *Bibl. Patr. Max.* ii. 67; and some account of them is given by Dr. Salmon, in *Dict. Christ. Biog.* iii. 726. See, too, the allusion of St. Chrysostom, *Hom. xlvi. in Actt. App.*

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